

**BENCHMARK ASSESSMENT AS A CATALYST FOR VIABLE SCHOOL
SPORTS PROGRAMME**

Kehinde Aluko Ph.D

Senior Lecturer

Institute of Education, University of Benin

Benin City

keto4life2005@yahoo.com

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the benchmark assessment as a viable tool for growing school sports. The primary and post-primary institutions are structured to function as social institutions for transmitting values of games and sports. These institutions can only creditably perform this role when the enabling environment is created. Similarly regular assessment conducted should lead to data accumulation which will point to the strength and weakness of the Physical Education and Sports (PES) programme. Unfortunately, what is prevalent in schools are lack of quality and quantitative equipment, facilities, manpower and supplies, including necessary benchmarks. These shortcomings alongside lack of systematic monitoring and evaluation of PES programme have been isolated as hindrances to viable school sports programme. It is therefore suggested that as a step to truly making benchmarking a catalyst for strong school sports, regular evaluation of PES programme should be undertaken, and benchmarks made the true guides to strengthened school sports.

Introduction

The school setting is the most organized social set up suited to undertake the function of transmitting the most revered culture of games and sports (Ojeme, 2009). It is in recognition of this fact that sports practitioners and stakeholders have encouraged, not only the situating of sports in the system, but also the provision of a rich and stimulating quantitative and qualitative sports environment. School sports is an organized activity conducted under the umbrella of the school. The primary and post primary schools are saddled with this responsibility in Nigeria. The programme is geared towards meeting physical/social-emotional, physiological and intellectual development of the child.

There is no doubt that the wholesome development of the child is the major aim of school sports. The sports programme is expected to equip the children with the necessary knowledge, practical skills and attributes required to face future challenges of life. The school sporting activities is therefore expected to be broad in scope, allow for mass participation made up of varied activities to cater for individual group interests and capabilities. Subsequently the activities should be such that allow individuals to fully explore and expand their innate potentials and skills.

In order to ensure that the child fully benefits from the school sports programme as expected, the structure should reflect the three major phases; (instructional, intramural and extramural programmes). These programmes interestingly operate under different philosophical and objectives setup. Worthy of note however is that intramural phase provides practical orientation and offers the participants equal

chance to fully explore movement. As a Laboratory, each child is allowed to develop their potentials. Furthermore, abundance of trained personnel, facilities, equipment and supplies are required to operate at this level.

This programme can be made useful to the child at this level if the activities are well planned and co-ordinated by trained personnel. Ojeme (2009) noted that exposing school children to formal learning of basic motor skills early in life, is the basic ingredient necessary for developing excellent sports proficiency. Failure during this period may strongly predict future failures. Unfortunately, the situation in most of our schools paints a sorry sight of what has become of school sports practices. Sports programme in schools are reduced to inter-house sports or football (Ojeme, 2001). This narrow perception and deplorable state of infrastructure seems to have stunted sports growth and development. These factors and lack of appropriate school sports policy have seriously inhibited sports in the formal educational sector.

There is no doubt that, there exist a gap in Nigerian schools' sports. There seems to be a lack of systematic monitoring and evaluation of the school sports programme. This has led to the absence of comprehensive and objective data. The scarcity of this all important data regarding the state of school sports has made it difficult for Nigerian schools to provide appropriate link in sports growth and development. Achieving improved practices in the field of physical education and sports is the objectives of this paper by accumulating data to guide the way to proceed. This brings to the need for regular assessment of school physical education.

Concept of assessment

Every educational endeavours is dynamic and geared toward achieving certain objectives. To this extent, determining the strength or weakness of such programme is imperative with the aim of finding the quality. This effectively brings to the need for assessment. In the opinion of Nitko & Brookharts, (2007), it is a process undertaken to obtain information in order to make decision about students or programme regarding progress strengths and weaknesses. Assessment or evaluation is defined by Weiss (1993) as the systematic evaluation of the operation and or the outcomes of a programme or policy, compared to a set of stated standards towards contributing to the improvement of the programme. The focus of assessment is to accumulate data and evidence to improve and establish standards. Importantly, a major thrust of assessment is not to improve programme only but also to beam search light on all aspect of the programme regarding the allocation of resources in programme performance.

Afemikhe (2007) posited that whatever form, assessment takes formal or informal, it is to serve and improve the well-being of people while focusing on their welfare. In spite of the numerous uses assessment or evaluation has been applied either educational programme, science programme, impact of continuous assessment on student achievement assessment of level of efficiency of resources management and organization not much has been conducted in school sport programme. This lack of empirical assessment data is a huge impediment to the growth and

development of physical education and sports in Nigeria. According to Afemikhe (2007), the role of assessment in enhancing and promoting the growth and development of school programme in Nigeria will no doubt be the necessary catalyst to establishing standards and quality. This will certainly help to establish the much desired benchmarks for the purpose of inter and intra school sports programme.

The concept of Benchmarking

The educational programme in products and processes are ever being subjected to monitoring and evaluation all with a view to ensuring quality in the inputs procedure. According to Roberts (1967) examining the “what” and “how” processes in education is to help guide the growth and development of evaluation plan aimed at promoting standards. The value of any programme cannot be inferred from the procedural framework mechanism without evaluating the material aspect of the programme. Against this understanding, educational programmes evaluation have always been a component part of ensuring improved programme in education to which physical education and sports (PES) is a part. The essence of physical opportunities for school children is to develop wholesome personality, using movement to actualize varied attributes. The capacity of the PES programme to achieve the stated aims and objectives are therefore evaluated by examining the programme of sports activities, infrastructure and manpower. It is important to point out that standard infrastructure and quality manpower are the necessary ingredients required to achieve these desired goals.

The concept of benchmarking is a tool directed towards improved performance and quality. Available literature view the concept as not completely new considering the work of Roberts stake in his countenance model of 1967. This model provided a synopsis of benchmarking in education.

There is no doubt that benchmarking has established its position as a veritable worthy tool to improve programme performance in every sphere of human endeavour, be it business and trade, library and information services or educational setting (Bale 2000 and Mcadan and Kelly, 2000). A functional definition and application of the concept has always been used to describe variant endeavours with the outcomes linked with improved performance. This probably informed Nicholas (2000) when he described benchmarking as a Total Quality Management (TQM) tool. In his opinion, the essence of such a tool is to make services, products and materials better, specifically, school sports programmes and activities available to students in the PES class. Corroborating this position, Taylor and Godfrey (2003) asserts that data benchmark is a product of qualitative measurement. The aim is to set the standard for best practices in the English Local authority sports facilities.

Benchmarking has been variously analyzed and described by different experts depending on their orientation as well as training. The concept can be expressed as a tool which is employed in bringing standards among similar organizations. As White (2002), aptly puts it, “it is an ongoing systematic process for measuring and comparing the processes of one organization to those of others”. The intramural

and extramural programmes may be different in terms of their philosophy, implementation and objective, however the quality output of the products from the programmes will reflect positively or negatively on the programme input. This conclusion can only be made with continuous monitoring and evaluation of the services, materials and manpower of the two programmes. Similarly as a comparative analysis, benchmarking can be used to ensure self evaluation in order to meet global acceptance, both in standards and practices.

The foregoing definitions categorized benchmarking as a kind of research design, better still an evaluation research (Powell, 2006). When this is the case, it could also be said that one major focus of benchmarking is a strive towards competition to achieve standard. This view is articulated by Reh (2009) when he asserts that benchmarking is a process of determining the very best practice in terms of standards. The common factor in all the definitions is that benchmarking is a systematic process for identifying and implementing best or better practices (Business performance improved Resources BPR 2007).

Thus, benchmarking could be seen as a process of measuring programme internal processes and identifying, understanding and adapting outstanding practices from other programmes, in a deliberate effort at achieving best practices. This, no doubt, makes the process of benchmarking a crucial tool for standards in any management set up. This probably informed the conclusion of Fadehem (2010) when he described benchmarking as management strategies/techniques often employed for healthy comparisons and self evaluation so as to adopt best practices for improved performance.

The foregoing immediately throws a challenge on the need for assessment of our school PES towards ensuring standards in school sports in Nigeria.

Benchmarking and viable school sports

The overwhelming agitation and support for schools to be used as basis for developing grassroot sports by experts in sports field and other stakeholders may stem from the accruing importance and the knowledge of what obtains in other countries. The role of benchmarks in this direction is instructive and acts as catalyst by providing intra-organizational and inter-organizational information about performance. The assessment tool attempts to provide detailed analyses of the programme of physical education and sports in the school by indicating the standards in order to strengthen performance. To achieve desired objectives, various aspect of the programme, ranging from intramural to the extramural as well as the interscholastic phases will have to be assessed. The data generated from these programmes will provide useful data upon which school sports programme can be built. This may have informed Hardman and Marshal (2000) to undertake an assessment of PE curriculum worldwide to determine the strength and weakness in all aspects of the programmes. This singular effort precipitated and catapulted institutional sports initiative and led to improvement in quality of PE in the schools.

Achieving best practices and standards required establishing appropriate tools (benchmarks) which will subsequently yield data for decision making. Developing standards for school sports using benchmarks require the need to identify and focus on those factors such as quality and quantity of facilities provided, equipment, manpower (both in “generalists” and qualified “specialists”) engaged in the schools. Achieving standards in school sports cannot come by accident. Deliberate attempt must be made to evaluate the inputs into the programme and assess the level of performance both in adequacy and quality (Miller and Miller, 1991). It is important that continuous evaluation of PE programmes be conducted and records or data obtained stored appropriately. These data when acted upon will no doubt stimulate improved school sports activities. Furthermore, such data will provide the basis for meaningful comparisons between the past and present and among programmes for future standards. There is no doubt that accumulation of appropriate data will promote operational efficiency and effectiveness necessary to drive school sports.

Problems of school sports programme in Nigeria

Primary and post-primary schools play a crucial role in the socialization process of the child. Sports is one of such vital functions of the school. How formidable is the school system to effectively discharge this responsibility? This question is very pertinent, because it provides an insight into the existing structure and available resources in the school sports programme. In addition, sports policy which will form the basic foundation upon which sports in the schools is to be founded needs to be examined to determine the extent to which it can drive sports programme. There is evidence that sports policies exist in Nigeria, as reflected in the National Sports Development Policy (1989) as also embedded in 2000, 2009 and National Policy on Education (2004), with provisions for Physical education and sports. Unfortunately, these policies are developmental and prescriptive, aimed at future growth of school sports. But lack of will to pursue and implement the set goals and objectives are the bane of school sports. Corroborating this observation, Shehu (1995) and Dibueku (2003) in their various studies regarding school sports policy noted that sports in primary and post-primary schools have not been implemented to any appreciable extent. This, in the opinions of Fur and Poon (1992) may be traced to the educational background of most school principals who passed through the British type of educational system, with much emphasis on academics and limited attention to sports.

Besides these, short comings, in consistency in policy formulation is largely responsible for the poor showing in PES programmes and school sports. These are ably captured by Dankadai (2001) and Ekeji (2004) who noted that frequent change in PES in the schools without recourse to any available empirical data has affected school sports practice negatively. The situation where physical education and sports was relegated from being a core subject to an elective subject by National Education Research and Development Centre (NERDC) without any viable research backing, has had a retrogressive impact on the subject in the school system (Ojeme, 2009). The practice of PES in schools makes one to wonder if PES is operated on a tripod, and grinded by different philosophy and objectives (Ojeme, 2009). The practice in most schools is that intramural sports is equated to

and treated as inter-house sports such that the PES is focused more on the highly skilled athlete to the detriment of less skilled.

The provision of facilities, equipment and manpower in most schools leaves much to be desired. This has hampered the growth and development of PES programmes in the schools, as attested to by the findings of Hardman and Marshal (2000).

In addition, the programme already in existent in the schools are not even documented. This stems from lack of evaluation and monitoring of what happens in PES programmes. This has resulted in disjointed state of affairs in PES practices in schools.

School sports programme

School sports covers all the organized sporting activities which are operated under the umbrella of the school. It is worthy of note that the essence of PES, both in primary and post-primary schools, is to meet the instructional intramural objectives of Sport activities, such as ball games, track and field's, swimming, dance, gymnastics and traditional sports one medium through which educational goals of PES are actualized (Patrick and Cho, 1992)

Regardless the philosophy and objectives of the PES, it is guided by certain principles which include.

- i. Development of knowledge and mental alertness;
- ii. Development of physical skills and fitness;

- iii. Development of desirable social attributes and acquisition of sports skills and attitude. Furthermore a step towards actualizing the above objectives, it is important that the prescribed activities and materials used be made to reflects requirements of the programme;
- iv. Mass participation with broad-based and varied activities; full exploration and expansion of individual skills;
- v. Optimum individual and collective performance of athletes (Bucher & Krotee, 2002, and Bucher, 1979).

Primary and post-primary institutions provide the solid base for the growth and development of sports. There is no doubt that tapping on the natural abundance of energy in the youths at this stage by structuring curriculum to suit their individual needs and interests will be most useful. (Targets, 2003). The PES, besides meeting nationalistic ends, will help the individual to develop the culture of participating in physical activities capable of inducing socially acceptable behavior and skills (Target; 2003, and Ojeme 2009). Essentially the school sports programme is an important part of the grassroot sports designed to identify talents for nurturing. There are numerous literature supporting school sports programme in various countries of the world for youths development. Specifically, in America, sports and schools are inseparable. The institutions are regarded as the best training grounds because of their descriptive, facilities and intellectual approach (Odegbami, 2012, Ojeme, 2009).

The school sports programme operates on three key phases; instructional, intramural and extramural levels. Among these three, the intramural phase provides the children the all important opportunity to explore and develop motor skills. To this extent, the success of the programme is determined largely by the intensity, purposefulness and sustainable implementation of activities prescribed for the children's experiences by qualified professionals. It is expected that the intramural phase would be broad-based so as to accommodate all participants. Opportunities to acquire motor skills in a variety of sports experiences should be provided. The unique positions of the intramural in the PES ensures that certain desirable ends are fulfilled; health and fitness, fun/enjoyment, feeling of achievement and above all the acquisition of appropriate motor skills.

As a laboratory for exploring movement experience, the activities should reflect the fundamentals of sports movement patterns such as;

- i. Gymnastics
- ii. Athletics
- iii. Dance movement patterns
- iv. Variety of games activities (Ojeme, 2009).

Continuos assessment of the activities made available in the PES while strengthening the observed deficiencies in line with societal dynamics will make the school sports a viable sports programme.

Conclusion

The essence of benchmark assessment is to help ensure regular evaluation of school sports programme and identify strengths and weaknesses. Benchmark in schools is to be judged in order to determine the viability of sports manpower, equipment and supply as a step towards building a solid school sports base.

As a first step, it is important to examine the existent of benchmarks for PES, although there is a semblance of sports programme. What is the practice of such sports programme in the school, the scope, intensity and the amount of time allotted to it; the quality and quantity of facilities, equipment, manpower and supplies available to anchor the programme?

In all the cases identified above and arising from studies from experts on the school sports programme, there seems to be lack of benchmarks and lack of regular assessment of PES. If this is the case, achieving maximum benefits may be a futile exercise. In this regards there is the need to establish a benchmark in the schools as well as undertake regular evaluation of PES programmes. If and when benchmarks are place, the growth and development of PES programme may be lifted.

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