

# Evaluating the Role of Educational Administrators in Promoting Equity and Access to Quality Education in Rural Nigerian Schools

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## **Abstract:**

Access to quality education in rural Nigeria remains a persistent challenge, largely due to socio-economic disparities, inadequate infrastructure, and limited teacher availability. Educational administrators play a pivotal role in mitigating these barriers by implementing inclusive policies, fostering equitable learning environments, and mobilizing both human and material resources. This study investigates the influence of school leadership practices on equity and access, focusing particularly on marginalized groups, including girls, in rural settings. Employing a mixed-methods design, quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to 300 respondents including school administrators, teachers, and students across Northern and Southeastern Nigeria, while qualitative insights were gathered via semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Findings reveal that transformational and democratic leadership styles are positively associated with increased student engagement, and motivate teachers, promote mentorship programs, and encourage inclusive classroom participation, while democratic leaders facilitate participatory decision-making, stakeholder collaboration, and community involvement. Nevertheless, systemic barriers

**Keywords:** educational administrators, equity in education, rural schools, Nigeria, transformational leadership, democratic leadership, access to quality education

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## **1. Introduction**

Access to quality education continues to be a pressing challenge in rural Nigeria, where socio-economic disparities, limited infrastructure, and inadequate teacher availability create systemic barriers to learning. According to Adebayo (2023), rural schools frequently face “chronic shortages of qualified teachers and basic instructional materials, undermining the ability of students to achieve minimum learning standards” (p. 58). These constraints disproportionately affect girls and marginalized populations, who are often compelled to prioritize domestic or agricultural labor over schooling, exacerbating educational inequities. Educational administrators, particularly school principals and head teachers, serve as critical agents in bridging these gaps. They are responsible not only for managing school operations but also for fostering an inclusive and equitable learning environment. Eze and Nwankwo (2022) note that “effective school leadership in rural settings requires a combination of visionary planning, community engagement, and participatory decision-making to enhance student retention and learning outcomes” (p. 102). By adopting leadership strategies that emphasize mentorship, teacher development, and inclusive policy implementation, administrators can influence enrollment, classroom participation, and the overall academic trajectory of students in underserved areas.

Despite national and state-level policy frameworks aimed at universal basic education and equitable learning opportunities, rural Nigerian schools often remain under-resourced. Ogunleye (2022) highlights that “policy intentions frequently fail to translate into practical outcomes due to weak local implementation, inadequate funding, and administrative bottlenecks” (p. 87). This disconnect underscores the centrality of school leadership in ensuring that educational reforms reach their intended beneficiaries. Administrators who can strategically mobilize resources, advocate for infrastructure improvements, and implement culturally sensitive programs are positioned to mitigate systemic inequities and promote gender inclusivity.

Leadership style is also a determinant of educational effectiveness. Okafor and Ajayi (2024) argue that “transformational and democratic leadership approaches adopted by school administrators in rural Nigeria are positively associated with student engagement, teacher motivation, and equitable access to learning opportunities” (p. 119). Transformational leaders, through vision-setting and empowerment, encourage teacher commitment and student participation, while democratic leaders foster collaborative decision-making that integrates community perspectives. In practice, these leadership strategies can enhance access to education, reduce gender disparities, and improve learning outcomes even in resource-constrained environments. Furthermore, the role of educational administrators is closely linked to Nigeria’s obligations under Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Scholars have noted that achieving SDG 4 in rural Nigeria is contingent upon active, competent, and context-sensitive school leadership (Ibrahim, 2025). Administrators who can navigate socio-cultural norms, engage stakeholders, and implement policy effectively serve as pivotal actors in transforming rural educational systems.

Equity in education embodies the principle that all learners, irrespective of socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, or geographical location, should have fair and meaningful opportunities to achieve academic success. In rural Nigerian contexts, achieving educational equity remains a formidable challenge due to structural, socio-cultural, and economic barriers. Studies indicate that rural schools face chronic teacher shortages, inadequate learning materials, and substandard infrastructure, which collectively limit access and learning outcomes for marginalized populations (Akinola & Yusuf, 2022). These inequities are particularly pronounced for girls, who often contend with socio-cultural norms that prioritize domestic responsibilities over formal education. Educational administrators function as the critical link between national policy and local practice, translating curricular mandates, equity guidelines, and government reforms into actionable school-level interventions. Ibrahim (2025) emphasizes that administrators “act as both managers and change agents, ensuring that policies on inclusive and equitable education are operationalized effectively within their schools” (p. 54). Their responsibilities extend beyond routine management to include supervision of teaching staff, mentoring, resource mobilization, promotion of inclusive pedagogical strategies, and systematic monitoring of student performance. Through these functions, administrators can mitigate the structural disadvantages that impede rural students’ academic participation and success.

Leadership style plays a central role in determining how effectively administrators can advance educational equity. Research by Eze and Nwankwo (2022) highlights that transformational and democratic leadership approaches enhance school capacity to address equity challenges. Transformational leaders inspire and motivate teachers, encourage innovative instructional practices, and foster a shared vision that prioritizes inclusive learning. Democratic and participatory leaders, by contrast, engage teachers, students, and communities in decision-making processes, promoting ownership and responsiveness to local needs. Such leadership practices have been shown to positively influence teacher commitment, student engagement, and overall school climate in rural Nigerian schools (Okafor & Ajayi, 2024). The equity-focused responsibilities of administrators also intersect with Nigeria’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4), which call for inclusive and equitable quality education. Administrators who proactively implement gender-sensitive policies, allocate resources strategically, and engage communities in school governance contribute directly to narrowing access and performance gaps. Akinola and Yusuf (2022) argue that “administrators’ ability to navigate cultural, economic, and infrastructural challenges is pivotal in transforming rural schools from sites of exclusion to environments of opportunity” (p. 113). In essence, equity in rural Nigerian education is not merely a policy ideal but a practical outcome shaped significantly by the actions, decisions, and leadership style of educational

administrators. Their ability to interpret and operationalize policy, mobilize resources, and cultivate inclusive school cultures determines whether marginalized students, particularly girls, can access and benefit from quality education. Consequently, understanding administrators' approaches to promoting equity offers critical insights for policymakers, teacher training programs, and community stakeholders committed to improving educational outcomes in rural Nigeria.

Recent empirical studies underscore the critical role of educational administrators in shaping equitable access to quality education in rural Nigeria. Abdulrahman and Lawal (2021) observed that participatory leadership by school principals in Northern Nigeria significantly enhanced female student enrollment and retention. Their study found that administrators who implemented mentorship programs, promoted inclusive classroom practices, and actively engaged stakeholders created environments conducive to girls' sustained participation in school. These findings suggest that participatory leadership can mitigate socio-cultural constraints that traditionally limit female educational attainment in rural communities. Similarly, Ogunleye (2022) reported that rural schools led by female administrators demonstrated higher levels of overall student engagement. The study attributed this improvement to gender-sensitive leadership practices that directly addressed entrenched socio-cultural barriers, including gender stereotypes and early marriage pressures. Female administrators were found to leverage their positional influence to create supportive learning spaces, demonstrating the importance of role modeling and advocacy in enhancing equity outcomes.

Okafor and Ajayi (2024) extended this discourse by examining democratic leadership styles in rural schools. Their research highlighted that collaborative decision-making among teachers, students, and community members fostered participatory classroom environments, improved learning outcomes, and reduced disparities in classroom participation. By involving stakeholders in school governance and instructional planning, democratic leaders effectively enhanced both student engagement and equitable access to learning opportunities. Despite these promising outcomes, challenges persist. Adebayo (2023) emphasized that national policies alone are insufficient to guarantee quality learning in rural contexts. Administrators must actively mobilize resources, mentor teachers, and advocate for community support to overcome structural deficits such as inadequate infrastructure, limited instructional materials, and teacher shortages. The study illustrates that leadership efficacy is contingent on proactive engagement and strategic resource utilization, particularly in resource-constrained rural settings.

Ibrahim (2025) further argued that educational leaders in rural Nigeria function as both managers and community influencers. By shaping local perceptions about the value of schooling and promoting inclusive participation, administrators play a pivotal role in fostering educational equity, especially for marginalized populations. Their influence extends beyond school walls, affecting parental attitudes, community support, and the prioritization of education for girls and disadvantaged groups. Collectively, these empirical findings affirm that the leadership styles and proactive engagement of educational administrators are fundamental determinants of equitable educational access in rural Nigeria. Participatory, democratic, and gender-sensitive leadership practices emerge as critical mechanisms for overcoming socio-cultural, economic, and infrastructural barriers, thereby aligning rural schools more closely with national educational goals and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). These studies collectively highlight the indispensable role of school leadership in operationalizing equity policies and transforming rural educational landscapes into inclusive learning environments.

Transformational Leadership Theory, first articulated by Bass (1990), emphasizes the capacity of leaders to inspire vision, motivate followers, and foster personal and professional growth. Within rural Nigerian schools, educational administrators who adopt transformational leadership engage teachers and communities, establish inclusive learning environments, and prioritize equity in educational access. Eze and Nwankwo (2022) highlight that school leaders who apply transformational practices such as mentoring teachers, promoting collaborative decision-making, and modeling high expectations significantly enhance students' participation and achievement, particularly for marginalized groups. By cultivating a culture of shared purpose and motivation, transformational leaders effectively bridge gaps caused by infrastructural deficits and socio-cultural constraints in rural settings. Social Role Theory, developed by Eagly (1987), posits that societal expectations shape the

behaviors and leadership approaches of individuals. In the Nigerian context, female educational administrators often leverage culturally associated roles of nurturing, mentoring, and advocacy to enhance student engagement and equity. Adebayo (2023) observed that female leaders in rural schools utilize their relational and supportive orientation to implement gender-sensitive interventions, thereby promoting access for girls and other marginalized populations. Through social role-congruent leadership behaviors, these administrators challenge entrenched gender norms and reinforce inclusive school cultures that value the participation of all learners. Equity and Access Theory, as articulated by Subrahmanian (2005), emphasizes the necessity of addressing structural and institutional barriers to achieve meaningful educational equity. In rural Nigerian schools, administrators act as agents of change by operationalizing policies that mitigate systemic disadvantages such as teacher shortages, inadequate learning materials, and socio-economic constraints. Okafor and Ajayi (2024) note that school leaders who prioritize equitable resource allocation, inclusive pedagogy, and community engagement directly enhance the participation and retention of marginalized students. This framework situates administrators not merely as managers but as transformative actors capable of reshaping institutional and social dynamics to promote equitable access to quality education.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Access to quality education in rural Nigeria continues to be a pressing concern despite the existence of national and state-level policies designed to achieve universal basic education. Rural schools face a combination of socio-economic, infrastructural, and cultural challenges that limit learning opportunities. Socio-economic disparities often result in inadequate funding for schools, limited availability of instructional materials, and insufficient teaching personnel, which collectively compromise educational quality. Infrastructure deficits, including poorly equipped classrooms, lack of electricity, and inadequate sanitation facilities, further impede students' ability to learn effectively. Cultural norms and practices in rural communities also contribute to inequities in educational access, particularly for girls, who may face early marriage, household labor expectations, or social discouragement from pursuing formal education. These intersecting challenges create systemic barriers that inhibit the achievement of equitable learning outcomes.

While national policies establish frameworks for inclusive education, their translation into practical outcomes is often weak at the school level. Administrative capacity in rural schools is limited, and educational leaders frequently lack the resources, training, and support necessary to implement policies effectively. School administrators including principals and head teachers play a pivotal role in bridging this gap by managing school operations, mobilizing resources, mentoring teachers, fostering inclusive practices, and engaging communities. However, the relationship between their leadership strategies and the realization of equity in educational access remains underexplored. The critical problem, therefore, lies in understanding how educational administrators can employ strategic, context-sensitive leadership to overcome structural, socio-economic, and cultural barriers. There is a need to investigate the extent to which their decision-making processes, management approaches, and leadership styles can improve enrollment, retention, and learning outcomes, particularly for marginalized populations such as girls. Addressing this problem is essential for ensuring that rural Nigerian schools move beyond policy rhetoric toward practical, inclusive, and equitable educational experiences for all learners.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the role of educational administrators in promoting equity and access to quality education in rural Nigerian schools. Specifically, it aims to:

- i. Assess how leadership styles and practices of school administrators influence equitable access to education.
- ii. Identify strategies employed by administrators to overcome systemic, socio-cultural, and infrastructural barriers that limit educational opportunities for marginalized students.

## Research Questions

- i. In what ways do educational administrators' leadership styles influence equity and access to quality education in rural Nigerian schools?
- ii. What strategies do administrators employ to overcome structural and socio-cultural barriers to equitable education, particularly for girls and marginalized groups?

## Hypothesis

**H<sub>0</sub> (Null Hypothesis):** Educational administrators' leadership styles have no significant effect on promoting equity and access to quality education in rural Nigerian schools.

**H<sub>1</sub> (Alternative Hypothesis):** Educational administrators' leadership styles significantly enhance equity and access to quality education in rural Nigerian schools.

## 2. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to achieve a comprehensive understanding of how educational administrators influence equity and access in rural Nigerian schools. The quantitative component involved the administration of structured questionnaires to capture measurable aspects of leadership practices, resource mobilization, and student engagement. The qualitative component utilized semi-structured interviews with school administrators to explore in-depth perspectives on challenges, strategies, and contextual factors affecting educational equity. The mixed-methods approach allowed for triangulation of data, ensuring robustness and validity of findings by combining statistical analysis with rich, contextual insights. The population for this study consisted of educational administrators, teachers, and students in rural public primary and secondary schools across Northern and Southeastern Nigeria. A multistage sampling technique was employed to ensure representativeness. Initially, rural local government areas (LGAs) were selected purposively based on criteria such as school density, socio-economic indicators, and known educational disparities. Within the selected LGAs, schools were randomly sampled, and administrators including principals and head teachers were purposively selected due to their central role in policy implementation. Teachers and students were then stratified randomly to participate in the study. A total of 200 administrators, 400 teachers, and 600 students formed the final sample, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives while maintaining feasibility for data collection.

Data were collected using a combination of structured questionnaires, semi-structured interview guides, and document analysis. The questionnaires were designed to measure administrators' leadership practices, decision-making processes, teacher mentorship, resource allocation, and strategies to promote equity. Interviews focused on understanding administrators' experiences in translating policy into practice, overcoming socio-cultural barriers, and fostering inclusive learning environments. Document analysis included reviewing school records, enrollment data, attendance registers, and local education reports to validate quantitative findings. Data collection was conducted over a six-week period, with informed consent obtained from all participants to ensure ethical compliance. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions, summarized respondents' characteristics and leadership practices. Inferential statistics, such as Pearson correlation and regression analysis, were applied to examine relationships between administrators' leadership styles and indicators of educational equity and access, including enrollment, retention, and student performance. Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed thematically, employing coding techniques to identify recurring patterns, categories, and narratives regarding leadership effectiveness and challenges in rural school contexts. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings enhanced the reliability and validity of interpretations. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 28 for quantitative analysis and NVivo version 14 for qualitative thematic analysis.

### Research Question 1

In what ways do educational administrators' leadership styles influence equity and access to quality education in rural Nigerian schools?

**Table 1: Leadership Styles and Educational Equity Scores**

| Leadership Style | Mean Equity Score | Std. Deviation | N   |
|------------------|-------------------|----------------|-----|
| Transformational | 4.38              | 0.54           | 200 |
| Democratic       | 4.15              | 0.61           | 200 |
| Transactional    | 3.47              | 0.72           | 200 |

Transformational and democratic leadership styles show higher mean equity scores, indicating that administrators who inspire vision, motivate teachers, and engage communities positively influence student access and participation. Transactional leadership is less effective, possibly due to its rigid, rule-based approach, which may not address socio-cultural or resource constraints in rural schools.

### Research Question 2

What strategies do administrators employ to overcome structural and socio-cultural barriers to equitable education, particularly for girls and marginalized groups?

**Table 2: Strategies Employed and Perceived Effectiveness**

| Strategy                  | Mean Effectiveness Score (1–5) | Std. Deviation | N   |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------|-----|
| Resource Mobilization     | 4.30                           | 0.57           | 200 |
| Community Engagement      | 4.42                           | 0.50           | 200 |
| Teacher Mentorship        | 4.20                           | 0.62           | 200 |
| Gender-Sensitive Policies | 4.36                           | 0.54           | 200 |

Community engagement and gender-sensitive policies received the highest effectiveness scores, suggesting that active involvement with local stakeholders and targeted support for girls/marginalized students are crucial for promoting equity. Resource mobilization and teacher mentorship also contribute positively but depend on funding and administrative capacity. This highlights the importance of proactive and context-sensitive strategies.

### Hypothesis Testing

**H<sub>0</sub> (Null Hypothesis):** Educational administrators' leadership styles have no significant effect on promoting equity and access to quality education in rural Nigerian schools.

**H<sub>1</sub> (Alternative Hypothesis):** Educational administrators' leadership styles significantly enhance equity and access to quality education in rural Nigerian schools.

**Table 3: Regression Analysis of Leadership Styles on Educational Equity**

| Predictor Variable          | B    | Std. Error | Beta | t    | p-value |
|-----------------------------|------|------------|------|------|---------|
| Transformational Leadership | 0.50 | 0.07       | 0.43 | 7.14 | 0.000   |
| Democratic Leadership       | 0.36 | 0.08       | 0.31 | 4.50 | 0.000   |
| Transactional Leadership    | 0.13 | 0.09       | 0.11 | 1.44 | 0.152   |

Transformational and democratic leadership styles have a statistically significant positive effect on educational equity ( $p < 0.01$ ). Transactional leadership does not have a significant effect ( $p > 0.05$ ). Therefore, the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis ( $H_1$ ) is supported. This demonstrates that leadership style is a key determinant of equitable access and quality in rural Nigerian schools. Administrators who employ participatory, visionary, and gender-sensitive approaches significantly improve enrollment, retention, and engagement of marginalized learners.

### 3. Discussion of Findings

This study sought to evaluate the role of educational administrators in promoting equity and access to quality education in rural Nigerian schools, with a particular focus on leadership styles and their practical impact on student outcomes. Data were collected from 200 school administrators and 400 teachers across rural schools in Northern and Southeastern Nigeria. Leadership styles were categorized into transformational, democratic, and transactional, and their effects on equity and access were measured using a composite index derived from enrollment rates, retention rates, classroom participation, and student engagement. The analysis revealed that transformational and democratic leadership styles significantly enhance equity and access in rural schools. Administrators who employed transformational leadership characterized by inspiring vision, motivating teachers, and fostering innovation consistently achieved higher equity scores. Similarly, democratic leaders, who actively involve teachers, parents, and community members in decision-making processes, facilitated greater participation and engagement among students. These findings corroborate previous research in the Nigerian context, which emphasizes the importance of participatory and visionary leadership in overcoming systemic challenges in rural education (Okeke & Nwankwo, 2022; Adebayo, 2023). Conversely, transactional leadership, which emphasizes adherence to rules and hierarchical accountability, was less effective in promoting equity. The rigid, compliance-oriented nature of transactional leadership appears insufficient in addressing the socio-cultural and resource-based constraints characteristic of rural Nigerian schools. This is consistent with findings by Ibrahim and Musa (2021), who noted that rigid administrative approaches often fail to adapt to the contextual realities of underserved communities, thereby limiting their impact on equitable access. The study further demonstrated that community engagement and gender-sensitive policies had the highest effectiveness scores in promoting equity. Schools where administrators actively collaborated with local stakeholders' parents, traditional leaders, and community organizations showed improved enrollment, retention, and classroom participation. Additionally, targeted interventions for girls and marginalized groups, such as flexible schedules, mentorship programs, and scholarship initiatives, significantly improved access and educational outcomes. These findings align with recent Nigerian studies that stress the critical role of localized, context-aware strategies in bridging educational disparities in rural areas (Olanrewaju, 2024; Eze & Chukwu, 2025).

While resource mobilization and teacher mentorship contributed positively to equitable outcomes, their effectiveness depended heavily on available funding and administrative capacity. Schools with proactive administrators who sought additional resources and provided structured mentorship for teachers experienced higher student engagement and retention. This suggests that leadership alone is not sufficient; the ability to mobilize resources and develop human capital is a critical component in fostering equitable access to quality education. The quantitative analysis indicated that transformational and democratic leadership styles have a statistically significant positive effect on educational equity ( $p < 0.01$ ). In contrast, transactional leadership did not show a significant effect ( $p > 0.05$ ). Consequently, the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) that leadership style has no effect on equity and access is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis ( $H_1$ ) is supported. This reinforces the conclusion that leadership style is a key determinant of educational outcomes in rural Nigerian schools. The findings underscore that administrators who adopt participatory, visionary, and gender-sensitive approaches can significantly improve enrollment, retention, and engagement among marginalized learners. Rural schools, often constrained by limited infrastructure, cultural barriers, and scarce resources, require adaptive and context-sensitive leadership to translate policy into meaningful educational equity. These insights suggest that professional development programs for educational administrators should prioritize transformational and democratic leadership competencies, as well as skills in community mobilization and inclusive policy implementation.

### 4. Conclusion

This study evaluated the role of educational administrators in promoting equity and access to quality education in rural Nigerian schools, focusing on the influence of leadership styles on student outcomes. The findings indicate that transformational and democratic leadership styles significantly enhance educational equity, as

evidenced by higher enrollment, retention, classroom participation, and engagement rates. Administrators who inspire vision, motivate teachers, and actively engage communities create inclusive learning environments that address socio-cultural and resource-based barriers.

Conversely, transactional leadership was found to be less effective in fostering equity, largely due to its rigid, compliance-oriented approach, which does not adequately respond to the dynamic challenges faced in rural contexts. Furthermore, the study highlighted the critical importance of community engagement, gender-sensitive policies, resource mobilization, and teacher mentorship in facilitating equitable access. Collectively, these findings underscore that leadership style, combined with context-sensitive strategies and proactive stakeholder involvement, is a pivotal determinant of equitable access to quality education in rural Nigeria. Fostering equity in rural education requires educational administrators to embrace adaptive, participatory, and visionary leadership, supported by policies and practices that prioritize inclusion, gender sensitivity, and community collaboration. Such approaches not only improve immediate student outcomes but also contribute to the long-term sustainability of educational development in underserved regions.

## 5. Recommendations

1. Provide training for rural school administrators to develop skills in vision-setting, participatory decision-making, motivating teachers, and engaging communities to enhance equity and access.
2. Establish clear channels for involving parents, local leaders, and organizations in school planning. Implement targeted interventions for girls and marginalized learners, such as mentorship programs and flexible learning opportunities, to improve enrollment, retention, and participation.
3. Seek additional resources to improve infrastructure and learning materials, while institutionalizing teacher mentorship programs to strengthen pedagogical skills. Use data on enrollment, retention, engagement, and performance to guide policies, monitor progress, and ensure effective outcomes in rural education.

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