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**International Journal of
Educational Management,
Rivers State University.**

Principals' Knowledge of Legal Issues in the Admissions of Junior Secondary School Students in Rivers State

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Abstract

The study investigated principals' knowledge of legal issues in the admissions of junior secondary school students in Rivers State. The study adopted the descriptive survey research design. Two research questions and two hypotheses guided the study. The population of the study consisted of all 208 junior secondary school principals in Rivers State. The multistage sampling techniques were adopted in selecting the sample size of 132. A structured questionnaire titled principals' understanding of legal issues in the admissions of junior secondary school students' questionnaire was used as instrument for data collection. Three experts validated the instrument and Cronbach Alpha Method was used to obtain an average reliability coefficient of 0.83. 132 copies of the questionnaire were administered to the respondents but only 121 which 92% of return rate were retrieved and used for the study. The items were rated on a four (4) point rating scale; mean and standard deviation was used to analyze the research questions while z-test was used in testing the formulated hypotheses. The findings reviewed that, junior secondary school principals in Rivers State to a high extent understand government policies and education law in the admissions of students. The researcher recommended that principals should abide by the government policies guiding the admissions of students into secondary schools in the study area to avoid unnecessary court cases against them and principals should be trained and retrained on education law to enable them to increase their understanding of students' fundamental right as regards their admissions into secondary schools.

Keywords: Principals' understanding, Legal issues, Admissions, Government policies, Education law

Introduction

Secondary school education is the form of education received after the basic primary school. The Federal Government of Nigeria (2014) defines secondary school education as the form of education children receive after primary school and before the tertiary stage. The importance of secondary education in educational system cannot be overemphasized. Apart from serving as the link between primary and tertiary education, it provides opportunity for a child to acquire additional knowledge, skills, and traits beyond the primary level. Someone who is in charge of the affairs in the secondary school is referred to as the principal and is responsible for running of the school. In the view of Akpan (2018), principals occupy a unique position in the secondary education system hence becomes an agent who executes or transmits rules and regulations

handed down by the employer. On this note, the main task is seen as interpretation of policies and execution of instructional programmes as it affects education process, personnel, funds, school plants and school-community relations.

In secondary schools, legal provisions have been established to guide admissions of student into the secondary school. For principals to comprehend fully the nature of their duties and obligation to the secondary schools, it becomes imperative to have some basic understanding and knowledge of the legal provisions of secondary school system (Biokoro, 2017). School laws and the educational system that determine students' rights are contained in several school documents including logbook, state edict, memos, administrative code, ordinances, school minute books, bulletins, government policies decision, administrative procedure Act, choice law Act, statutory policies among others. These documents are resource materials schools' authorities should draw inference from towards knowing how to relate with students in the matter that concerns their rights. Although, these documents are valuable tools in equipping the school head in legal matters, they cannot replace their training in education laws.

Educational law is an administrative orders, ethics, legislations, rules and regulations put in place by government and enforceable through judicial process to guide educational decisions. According to Peretomode (2014), educational law is a heterogeneous body of regulations which directly and indirectly affect the educational and administrative processes of the educational system. Education laws are meant for the protection of the human rights of staff and students in a school setting. It therefore implies that education laws are protective, providing the necessary framework and procedure for institutional management. As a result, its knowledge by those operating the education system cannot be overemphasized since schools are the ideal context for legal education activities. In sequence, legal knowledge of admission enables school principals to encourage respect for the rule of law and fundamental principles of justice built into international human right treaties. According to Obun, Akpama and Ayang (2012), public school principals must be prepared to apply understanding of school law in a variety of situations. Some of such situations apply to school discipline, decision making and law by judicial decision - a judicial interpretation which is an important element of the legal process under the doctrine of *Stare decisis* (stand by the decision) and decision on examination malpractices, imposition of corporal punishment, expulsion of students from school and the rights of students. They also argued that school principals and educators in general should have

understanding of education law in order to minimize their own legal liability and to prevent potential legal problems in the school system.

With so many aspects of schooling affected by law, principals must ensure that they are proactive in minimizing the possibility of breaking any law that stem from any of the issues in the school system. Laws in Nigeria which applied to admission of students into secondary schools are enshrined in the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in chapter 4 containing the fundamental rights from where education laws derive its strength. These laws are fundamental human rights such as right to life; right to dignity of human person; right to fair hearing; right to freedom of movement; right to freedom of expression; right to freedom of assembly and association and right to freedom from discrimination (Peretomode, 2014). These are laws that prevent the school principals from acting indiscriminately when dealing with students and staff. Arong and Ogbadu (2015) noted that, principals must have the ability to anticipate possible dangers and take steps to avoid them and regulate school life in such a way that learning is taking place while the rights of all are being respected.

The laws of the Rivers State stipulate that schools and institutions whether private or public should keep vital records and books such as: a register of admission, progress and withdrawal, a register of attendances and fees, a logbook, a cash account of the public institution showing every item of receipt and expenditure. They should also have a copy of the law and all regulations and amendments of the state and country. Principals should have a time-table approved by the ministry, weekly diaries of literacy and practical work and teachers' working notes of at least one lesson per day, a visitor's book, a corporal punishment book, and a record of progress on which promotions in primary and senior secondary have been based (Oramisi, 2017).

The general provisions relating to education as enacted in 2014 stated that:

It shall be the duty of the person in charge of a school or institution to ensure that no racial qualification shall be required of any member of the staff, teacher or pupil in any institution, and no such member, teacher or pupil shall be under any disability or suffer any disadvantage or be accorded any advantage on the grounds of race or nationality: nor shall any pupil be refused admission to any school or institution or be under any disability or suffer any disadvantage or be accorded any advantage on the grounds of religion (Cap E2, p.5).

Laws are made to avoid litigations and administrative efficiency or probity. The government has often conceived and implemented policies to enhance the admission and enrolment of students into the secondary school system. A policy serves the purpose of ensuring that every official action of an organisation must have a basis or a backing. Ndu (2017) considers that a policy is an overall guide that gives the general limits and direction in which administrative action will take place. In this regard Gallant (2014) suggested that school principals should be knowledgeable about school law not only as a response to the growing number of education-related court cases but also as a proactive way of providing an effective defence against possible litigation. He went further to state that, school principals who possess understanding of law may be better positioned to make informed decisions concerning legal issues in their administrative practices. They may be better able to anticipate legal problems that may arise from their disciplinary actions and decisions that may infringe on students' rights. Also, they would be able to consider the legal implications and respond appropriately.

Statement of the Problem

Functionally, law is normative as it regulates, guides, and evaluates human conduct. It therefore helps society determine the extent to which specific acts, commission and omissions conform to acceptable standard of behaviour or otherwise (Asuru in Elenwo, 2023). The administration of secondary education in some parts of the country appears to have school principals who may not have acquired the relevant legal understanding required for a holistic school operation; whereas the management of a school involves the rule of the law that should regulate the conduct of administrators, staff, and students. Informed principals, with knowledge about law, understand the discharge of their duties is guided by the rules and regulations governing their schools. Consequently, litigation becomes inevitable where discipline and decision made by school authorities infringe on students' and staff's rights.

It is this background, that studies need to be carried out to investigate the extent of principals' understanding of legal issues in the admissions of secondary school students in Rivers State.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to investigate principals' knowledge of legal issues in the admissions of Junior Secondary School Students in Rivers State.

Specifically, the study sought to:

1. ascertain the extent of principals' knowledge of government policies in the admissions of Junior Secondary School Students in Rivers State.

2. examine the extent of principals' knowledge of education law in the admissions of Junior Secondary School Students in Rivers State.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent is principals' knowledge of government policies in the admissions of Junior Secondary School Students in Rivers State?
2. To what extent is principals' knowledge of education law in the admissions of Junior Secondary School Students in Rivers State?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested in the study at 0.05 level of significance:

1. There is no significant difference in the mean responses of the male and female principals on the extent of principals' knowledge of government policies in the admissions of Junior Secondary Schools Students in Rivers State.
2. There is no significant difference in the mean responses of the male and female principals on the extent of principals' knowledge of education law in the admissions of Junior Secondary Schools Students in Rivers State.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey design. This study was carried out in Rivers State. The population of the study comprised 208 junior secondary schools' principals in Rivers State. The population of the study is made up of 154 male principals and 54 female principals. The sample of the study consisted of 132 principals made up of 96 male principals and 36 female principals. In selecting the sample size for the study, multistage sampling technique was adopted.

The instrument for data collection is titled; Principals' Knowledge of Legal Issues in the Admission of Junior Secondary School Students Questionnaire (PKLIJSSSQ). The instrument was designed by the researcher. The instrument had two sections, A and B. Section A had items designed to review personal information about the respondents. Section B had two clusters with 5 items each which focused on answering the research questions. The response format adopted was a four-point rating scale as follows: Very High Extent (VHE=4), High Extent (HE=3), LE (Low Extent=2) and Very Low Extent (VLE=1). The instrument was subjected to validation by three experts: one from the Department of Educational Management and two from the

Department of Measurement and Evaluation in the Faculty of Education, Rivers State University. The reliability of the instrument was also established using 20 junior secondary schools' principals randomly sampled from junior secondary schools which were not sampled. Data gathered from their responses were computed and the scores yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.84 and 0.81 respectively. The reliability coefficient showed the instrument was reliable. The researcher through the help of her two trained research assistants administered the questionnaire directly to the respondents. Out of the 132 questionnaires distributed, only 121 were completely completed while 11 questionnaires from male principals were not recovered. There was 92% of return rate and it took the researcher and her trained assistants two weeks for completion of the exercise. Data collected from the respondents were analyzed using Mean and Standard Deviation. To test the two null hypotheses formulated for this study at 0.05 level of significance, z-test was used. The formulated null hypotheses were rejected when the calculated z value is greater than or equals to the z-critical value of ± 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance and failed to reject null hypotheses when the z-calculated value is less than the z-critical value of ± 1.96 at .05 level of significance.

Results

Research Question 1: To what extent is principals' knowledge of government policies in the admissions of Junior Secondary School Students in Rivers State?

Table 1: Mean Responses of Female and Male Principals on the Extent of Principals' Knowledge of Government Policies in the Admissions of Junior Secondary School Students in Rivers State.

S/No	Items	Males		Decision	Females		Decision
		— X	SD		— X	SD	
1	Principals respect the laws, rules and regulations made by the government regarding students' admission.	3.12	0.95	HE	2.86	1.09	HE
2	Principals follow laid down procedures when dealing with students' admission	2.74	1.08	HE	2.94	0.99	HE
3	Adhering to government policy on admission absolves principals of litigation	2.71	1.15	HE	2.75	1.03	HE
4	Principals' decision on admission is consistent with government policy.	2.94	1.03	HE	2.78	0.92	HE
5	Principals have knowledge that non-compliance of government policies on admission is tantamount to suing	2.88	0.92	HE	2.72	1.00	HE
Grand Mean/SD		2.88	1.03	HE	2.81	1.01	HE

Source: Researcher's Field Result, 2024.

Table 1 above shows principals' knowledge of government policies in the admissions of Junior Secondary School Students in Rivers State is to a high extent with the following mean values for items (1-5) for male principals: 3.12, 2.74, 2.71, 2.94 and 2.88 and for female principals: 2.86, 2.94, 2.75, 2.78 and 2.72 respectively.

Research Question 2: To what extent is principals' knowledge of education law in the admissions of Junior Secondary School Students in Rivers State?

Table 2: Mean Responses of Female and Male Principals on the Extent of Principals' Knowledge of Education Law in the Admissions of Junior Secondary School Students in Rivers State.

S/No	Items	Males		Decision	Females		Decision
		\bar{X}	SD		\bar{X}	SD	
6	Principals have knowledge of students' right to freedom of discrimination in school admission	2.86	1.02	HE	2.97	0.96	HE
7	Principals have that that trampling upon students' rights as regards admission can lead to litigation	2.55	1.15	HE	2.56	1.01	HE
8	Principals have knowledge that that denying a student admission based on the state of origin amounts to violation of students' fundamental right	2.91	1.00	HE	2.86	1.06	HE
9	Principals have knowledge that that denying student admission based on racism violates students right	2.93	0.90	HE	2.67	1.05	HE
10	Principals have knowledge that setting irregular standard between both genders for admission in same school can fuel litigation	3.22	0.87	HE	2.89	1.02	HE
Grand Mean/SD		2.89	0.99	HE	2.79	1.02	HE

Source: Researcher's Field Result, 2024.

Table 2 above shows principals' knowledge of education law in the admissions of Junior Secondary School Students in Rivers State is to a high extent with the following mean values for items (6-10) for male principals: 2.86, 2.55, 2.91, 2.93 and 3.22 and for female principals: 2.97, 2.56, 2.86, 2.67 and 2.89 respectively.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in the mean responses of the male and female principals on the extent of principals' knowledge of government policies in the admissions of Junior Secondary Schools Students in Rivers State.

Table 3: Z-Test Analysis of the Responses on Principals' Knowledge of Government Policies in the Admissions of Junior Secondary School Students.

Respondents	N	\bar{X}	SD	DF	LS	z-cal	z-crit	Decision
Male Principals	85	2.88	1.03	119	.05	0.35	± 1.96	Failed to reject no significant difference
Female Principals	36	2.81	1.01					

Source: Researcher's Field Result, 2024.

Table 3 above shows no significant difference in the mean responses of male and female principals on the extent of principals' knowledge of government policies in the admissions of Junior Secondary Schools in Rivers State. The z-calculated value of 0.35 was less than the z-critical value of ± 1.96 ($0.35 \leq \pm 1.96$) for degree of freedom of 119 at .05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis was accepted which states that there is no significant difference in the mean responses of male and female principals on the extent of principals' knowledge of government policies in the admissions of Junior Secondary Schools in Rivers State.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference in the mean responses of the male and female principals on the extent of principals' knowledge of education law in the admissions of Junior Secondary Schools Students in Rivers State.

Table 4: Z-Test Analysis of the Responses on Principals' Knowledge of Education Law in the Admissions of Junior Secondary School Students.

Respondents	N	\bar{X}	SD	DF	LS	z-cal	z-crit	Decision
Female Teachers	85	2.89	0.99	119	.05	0.50	± 1.96	Failed to reject no significant difference
Male Teachers	36	2.79	1.02					

Source: Researcher's Field Result, 2024.

Table 4 above shows no significant difference in the mean responses of male and female principals on the extent of principals' knowledge of education law in the admissions of Junior Secondary Schools in Rivers State. The z-calculated value of 0.50 was less than the z-critical value of ± 1.96 ($0.50 \leq \pm 1.96$) for degree of freedom of 119 at .05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis was accepted which states that there is no significant difference in the mean responses of male and female principals on the extent of principals' knowledge of education law in the admissions of Junior Secondary Schools in Rivers State.

Discussion of Findings

The findings to research question 1 which focused on the extent of principals' knowledge of government policies in the admissions of Junior Secondary School Students in Rivers State with grand mean of 2.88 and 2.81 for male and female principals respectively revealed that the respondents agreed to the statements that, principals respect the laws, rules and regulations made by the government regarding students' admission; principals follow laid down procedures when dealing with students' admission; adhering to government policy on admission absolves principals of litigation; principals' decision on admission is consistent with government policy and principals have knowledge that non-compliance of government policies on admission is tantamount to suing. So, the study revealed that principals to a high extent have knowledge of government policies in the admissions of Junior Secondary Schools in Rivers State. The finding agreed with the findings of Peretomode (2014) which suggested that the school administrators, including principals, should employ preventive legal management strategies in their students' management. They observed that legal aspects that border on educational administration being an emerging issue in Nigerian educational system are important and indispensable tools for on-the-job survival of educators, principals and teachers today. They revealed further that legal aspects which relate to school administrative practices, including students' management, particularly in the secondary schools, find their sources from the constitution, legislation in form of decrees, edicts, government policies, bye-laws and common laws (courts decisions or judgment laws)

Result on hypothesis 1 with a z-calculated value of 0.35 which is less than z-critical of ± 1.96 proved that there is no significant difference in the mean responses of male and female principals on the extent of principals' knowledge of government policies in the admissions of Junior Secondary School Students in Rivers State. This indicated that both group of respondents; male and female principals, agreed to the fact that principals have knowledge of government policies in the admissions of Junior Secondary School Students in Rivers State.

The findings to research question 2 which focused on the extent of principals' knowledge of education law in the admissions of Junior Secondary School Students in Rivers State with grand mean of 2.89 and 2.79 for male and female principals respectively revealed that the respondents agreed to the statements that, principals have knowledge of students' right to freedom of discrimination in school admission; principals have knowledge that trampling upon students' rights as regards admission can lead to litigation; principals have knowledge that denying a student admission based on the state of origin amounts to violation of students' fundamental right; principals have knowledge that denying student admission based on racism violates students' right and principals have knowledge that setting irregular standard between both genders for admission in same school can fuel litigation. Hence, the study revealed that principals to a high extent have knowledge of education law in the admissions of Junior Secondary Schools in Rivers State. The finding was in agreement with the findings of Arong and Ogbadu (2015) who found that school principals must be knowledgeable and be able to use and make moral judgement and decisions with the dignity of each person in mind, while promoting equality in all aspects of education,

Result on hypothesis 2 with a z-calculated value of 0.50 which is less than z-critical of ± 1.96 proved that there is no significant difference in the mean responses of male and female principals on the extent of principals' knowledge of education law in the admissions of Junior Secondary School Students in Rivers State. This indicated that both group of respondents; male and female principals, agreed to the fact that principals' knowledge education law in the admissions of Junior Secondary School Students in Rivers State.

Conclusion

In the light of the findings of the study, it was concluded that principals' knowledge of the legal issues in the admissions of Junior Secondary Schools in Rivers State is significantly high.

Recommendations

The study recommends that:

1. Principals should abide by the government policies guiding the admissions of students into secondary schools in the study area to avoid unnecessary court cases against them.
2. Principals should be trained and retrained on education law to enable them increase their understanding of students' fundamental right as regards their admissions into secondary schools.

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