

## **Principals Exercise of Administrative Autonomy in Secondary Schools: A Study of Ebonyi State Secondary School System, Nigeria**

Onele A.A. and P.O. Nwafukwa

*Department of Educational Foundations, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki.*

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**Abstract:** *The study investigated the extent principals exercise autonomy in the administration of secondary school in Ebonyi State. The study was guided by four research questions and one hypothesis. The researchers adopted a descriptive survey design. The population of the study was made up of 233 principals and 1,056 teachers, giving a total of 1279 people. The sample of the study comprised of 710 respondents (100 principals and 610 teachers) selected through disproportionate stratified simple random sampling technique. A 28-item structured questionnaire entitled principals exercise of autonomy in secondary school Administration (PEASSA) was designed by the researchers for use to collect data from respondents. The instrument was validated by three experts to ascertain the suitability and face validity of the items. The reliability of the instrument was determined using Cronbach Alpha approach to ensure the internal consistency, and reliability co-efficient of 0.78 was obtained for the 28 items. Mean and standard deviation scores were used to answer the research questions while t-test statistics was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 alpha levels. The findings of the study revealed among other that principals exercise autonomy in curriculum development and budget preparation to a low extent in secondary school administration. Based on the findings, recommendations were made among others that government of Ebonyi State should allow some level of autonomy for school principals to exercise especially in areas of school budget preparation, staff professional development, as well as curriculum development and instructional programmes.*

**Key words:** *Principals, autonomy, administration, secondary, school and Ebonyi.*

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### **I. Introduction**

School administrative autonomy has been conceived from an array of perspectives. It has been conceived in relation to teacher professional development, school organizational climate, safety strategies and the schools' calendar and schedule [1]; [2] [3]. In relation to teacher professional development, [4] conceptualized school administrative autonomy as the effort that is geared towards coordinating and training of teachers for improvement of instruction, without external interference. In relation to school organizational climate [5] viewed school administrative autonomy as a process and/or behaviour system that exists for the enhancement of learning opportunities of students. Viewing it in relation to school safety, school's calendar and schedule, [6] applied the social system theory as a way of thinking about school administrative autonomy and conceptualized it as a behaviour system formally provided to various schools in order to have greater authority towards the definition of their school curriculum, hire and replacement of staff, organize their school day or year, and control the school budget. As [7] noted, school administrative autonomy simply involves decentralization of decision making authority to school level for instructional improvement. So, school administrative autonomy has to do with all efforts geared toward making decisions independently for instructional improvement. Although, school administrative autonomy has been viewed from these different perspectives, the central emphasis is on school administrator's autonomy in school governance for administrative role

School administrative role, on the other hand refers to the activities engaged in by the school administrator in the course of school management, [8]. As [9] rightly pointed out, the critical factor that distinguishes school administrative role from other roles is its nature of dependency and not the title or the position of the actor. [10] stressed that the function of administrative role, has to do with goal setting and problem solving, professional development of staff and fund management and evaluation of educational outcomes. For the principal to discharge his administrative role effectively, he must be critical in developing and ensuring effective teaching, improving student achievement and turning around low-performing schools [11]. To effectively carry out the tasks of school administration, the principal as the school administrator need to exercise some degree of independence in making decisions in terms of budgeting, personnel management, administration of curriculum and instructional programme and fund management. According to [12], for principals to fulfil their obligations to improve teaching and learning, hire and support excellent teaching staff and establish a healthy school culture, they must be empowered to make the basic school-based decisions.

In the view of [13], it is believed that giving principals greater autonomy moves the locus of decision making to the organizational level where schools provide educational services. The goal of which is to improve student learning achievement. Scholars [14] argued that school leaders (in most cases, the principals) must control the key mechanisms of educational governance. These mechanisms include decision that pertains to school budgets, professional development, curriculum and instruction, and calendar and schedule [15]. As such for effective performance, decision making as it relate to these mechanisms must be centered on the school based-manager (principals). School budget autonomy has to do with of decision making authority. In his support, [16] described these four aspects as the key areas in which schools should be provided with greater autonomy. The school budget has to do with estimation of school programmes (Federal Ministry of Education and Youth Development, 1993 [17]. It also has to do with necessary actions required to draw up plans or reflect school programmes to expected revenue and expenditure.

In Ebonyi state, principals appear to be much involved in the drawing of financial plan, hence making the implementation of budget plan in various schools loopsided. Staff professional development, deals with the advise or training given to teachers in the course of teaching and learning process with the overall aim of improving instruction in the school system, while curriculum and instruction has to do with drawing of objectives and course content of school programme; and calendar and schedule has to do with organization of the school day and calendar [18].

Although, these mechanisms are quite indispensable and invariably a requisite for effective operation of school organization, it must be appreciated from the current trend of poor administrative status in secondary schools that principals appears not to fully exercise their administrative function for improvement of instruction in secondary schools. Also, considering the geography of Ebonyi State, it must be understood that while some schools are in the urban areas, others are within the rural setting. Available research evidence [19], [20] have revealed that autonomy of decision making authority are to a large extent dependent on school location, in this regard arguments earlier advanced by [4] that exercise of autonomy in decision making authority may vary according to immediate environment of the school ought not to be taken for granted. It may be worth speculating that exercise of administrative autonomy for handling environmental related problems may not be the same. It is also believed that the major concern regarding greater autonomy is the extent to which an unequal distribution of school resources exists. Areas where resource equality are achieved, such as the human capital capacity of teachers and school principals varies across schools, the decentralization of decision-making authority may exacerbate the unequal distribution of school outcome.

With the increasing inefficiency in various aspects of school administration (operations) as reported by Chief Supervisory principals of Ebonyi State (Secondary Education Board, 2016) which obviously manifest in poor students' achievement, government has resolved to lay emphasis on policies that will improve principals' autonomy in school administration. As [20] observed that there may be no problem in the formulation of policy and articulation of enabling environment, the real problem may be with the implementation. So, in spite of all the policies, it is observed by the researchers that secondary school administrators hardly know people to be recruited into the school system. In terms of development, the school board decides who is to receive further training and how and even when. Available report (SEB 2016) evidence disclosed that school board is empowered to make estimate covering all the schools the financial year. It is also observed male and female head teachers appear ignorant when it comes to coordination and utilization of available resources. Also according to the researchers observation the extent male and female principals exercise autonomy in this regard is not established empirically in Ebonyi state.

In the same vein, school calendar and schedule have been the responsibility of state Ministry and Federal Ministry of Education. Principals appears not to have any input in this regard. In a related opinion, [8] observed that some schools most often move above others in terms of carrying out some aspects of school programme. These issues appear to be creating vacuum when it comes to the level to which principals are carrying out their administrative functions. It is against this premise that the researcher wants to investigate the extent principals exercise their autonomy in school administration in Ebonyi State of Nigeria.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

The persistent cases of inefficiency in school administration as characterized by administrative incompetence of school principals and poor achievement of school goals are issues of great concern, not only to the education ministry but also the to society. This ugly situation coupled with poor quality of job done by school principals tend to generate doubts as to whether secondary school principals are executing their school administrative functions very effectively.

With the current emphasis of the education ministries on the improvement of school managerial functions for the purpose of enhancing the actualization of school objective at secondary school level it is therefore, necessary that researchers in the field of educational administration explore the extent principals exercise autonomy in school administration so that whatever on the job training programme the government

may design will take into consideration the experiences principals are facing in the exercise of autonomy in terms of budgetary preparation, staff professional development, curriculum and instructional programme. Unfortunately, in Ebonyi State, the assessment of the extent principals exercised administrative autonomy in this regard according to the researchers best of knowledge are still based on theoretical speculations without empirical backing. As such, the template on which extent principals exercise of administration autonomy could be transcribed is still lacking and so constitutes a challenges to researchers in educational administration. This study is a response to the challenge and is faced with the problem of exploring the extent principals exercise administrative autonomy in secondary schools in Ebonyi State of Nigeria.

### 1.3 Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to explore principal's experiences of autonomy in administration of secondary schools in Ebonyi State. Specifically, this study seeks to examine the extent.

1. Principal exercise autonomy in budgetary preparation.
2. School principal exercise autonomy in staff professional development.
3. Principal exercise autonomy in curriculum and instructional programme.
4. Principal exercise autonomy in the preparation of school calendar and schedules.

### 1.6 Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study

1. To what extent principals exercise autonomy in the preparation of school budget.
2. To what extent do school principals exercise autonomy in staff professional development?
3. To what extent do school principals exercise autonomy in administration of curriculum and instructional programme.
4. To what extent do school principals exercise autonomy in preparation of school calendar and schedule?

### Hypothesis

One null hypothesis guided the study at 0.05 level of significance.

**HO<sub>1</sub>:** Effective school administration does not significantly depend on extent principal's exercised administrative autonomy in secondary schools in Ebonyi State.

## II. Method

This study adopted a descriptive survey design. The researchers investigated principal's exercise of administrative of autonomy in secondary schools. A study of Ebonyi State, Nigeria. The population of the study comprised all the 223 public secondary school principals and 1056 teachers, giving a total of 1279. A disproportionate stratified random sampling technique was used to select 100 principals and 610 teachers making a total of 710 respondents. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire designed by the researchers. It is a 28-item questionnaire constructed on a 4-point scale by the researchers. It also received validation from two experts in Educational Administration and planning, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki. Reliability of the instrument was established using test re-test method at interval of two weeks using pearson product moment correlation co-efficient which yielded an index of 0.71. the 4-point scale of Very High Extent (VHE), High Extent (HE), Low Extent (LE) and Very Low Extent (VLE) were rated 4,3,2 and 1 respectively, Data collected were analyzed using mean scores and standard deviation. Any mean score of 2.50 and above indicate that principals exercise their administrative autonomy to a very high extent and high extent while below showed that they exercise their autonomy to a low and very low extent. T-test was used to test the null hypotheses formulated to guide the study. If the t-calculated is less than the t-critical, the hypothesis will be significant and vise visa.

## III. Results

**Research Question 1:** To what extent do principals exercise autonomy in budgetary preparation in Ebonyi State Secondary Schools.

**Table I:** Extent to which principal exercise autonomy in budget preparation in Ebonyi State Secondary Schools.

S/N	Item Statement	$\bar{x}$	SD	Decision
1	Exercise of autonomy in decision making.	2.32	0.59	LE
2	Exercise of autonomy in drawing up of Framework.	2.33	0.76	LE
3	Autonomy in proposing expenditure for school plan period.	2.30	0.95	LE
4	Autonomy is sourcing proposed revenue for financing school projects.	2.10	0.95	LE
5	Autonomy in the disbursement of proposal expenditure.			

6	Exercise of autonomy in reflecting school programme to the expected revenue and expenditure.	2.41	0.52	LE
7	Autonomy in determining annual school needs in terms of programmes.	1.67	0.52	VLE
	<b>Mean of Mean</b>	<b>2.29</b>	<b>0.89</b>	<b>LE</b>
		<b>2.20</b>	<b>0.21</b>	<b>LE</b>

**Key:** VHE = Very High Extent, HE= High Extent, LE= Low Extent, VLE= Very Low Extent and DEC= Decision.

Summary of the result on table I revealed that the respondents indicate low extent on the level of which principals exercise administrative autonomy in budget preparation. The study also showed that the mean ( $\bar{x}$ ) score of all the items were below the criterion mean of 2.50 and the SD ranged from 0.52 to 0.95 which were around the central mean. Equally, the mean of mean stood at 2.20 which also is lower than the criterion mean. Therefore, it was an indication that principals exercise administrative autonomy in budget preparation to a low extent in Ebonyi State of Nigeria.

**Research Question 2:** To what extent do school principals exercise autonomy in staff professional development?

**Table 2:** Mean response of the respondents on the extent principals exercise autonomy in staff professional development in Ebonyi State Secondary Schools.

S/N	Item Statement	$\bar{x}$	SD	Decision
1	Exercise of autonomy in advising governance on the areas teachers needs training.	2.46	0.67	LE
2	Exercise of autonomy in retraining teachers for overall aim of improving instruction in the school system.	2.31	0.20	LE
3	Principals exercise of autonomy in planning their own professional training.	2.43	0.63	LE
4	Exercise of autonomy in the decision of e-learning programmes required of teachers.	2.36	0.67	CE
5	Exercise of autonomy in the planning of polices that enhance teachers continuing education.	2.07	0.50	LE
6	Exercise of autonomy in terms of education reform for workers' improvement.	2.38	0.73	LE
7	Exercise of autonomy in updating teachers' knowledge in innovations.	2.20	0.21	LE
8	Exercise of autonomy in the process of nurturing prospective for effective teaching and learning.	2.31	0.20	LE
	<b>Mean of Mean</b>	<b>2.36</b>	<b>0.67</b>	<b>LE</b>

**Key:** VHE = Very High Extent, HE= High Extent, LE= Low Extent, VLE= Very Low Extent and DEC= Decision.

Result of data analysis presented on table 2 shows that in all the items, the mean scores were below the criterion mean of 2.50. The mean of mean showed 2.36 and the SD ranged between 0.20 - 0.73 which were around the central mean. This implies that principals' exercise their administrative autonomy to a low extent in Ebonyi State secondary schools, especially when it comes to decision on staff professional development.

**Research Question 3:** To what extent do school principals exercise administrative autonomy in curriculum development and instructional programme?

**Table 3:** Mean response of the respondents on the extent principals exercise administrative autonomy in curriculum development and instructional programme.

S/N	Item Statement	$\bar{x}$	SD	Decision
1	Exercise of autonomy in the alignment of course content with the curriculum objectives.	2.38	0.56	LE
2	Exercise of autonomy in provision of guideline for instructional delivery.	1.31	0.74	LE
3	Exercise of autonomy in supervising the extent of implementation of curriculum content.	2.31	0.94	LE
4	Exercises of autonomy in the assessment of the extent teachers are able to integrate the curriculum and instruction.	2.40	0.71	LE
5	Exercise of autonomy in ensuring that students examination questions reflect the curriculum content.	2.59	0.77	LE

6	Exercise of autonomy in ensuring that school policies are translated into visible action.	2.31	0/94	LE
7	Exercise of autonomy in measuring students knowledge of discrete facts.	2.34	0.62	LE
<b>Mean of Mean</b>		<b>2.32</b>	<b>0.91</b>	<b>LE</b>

**Key:** VHE = Very High Extent, HE= High Extent, LE= Low Extent, VLE= Very Low Extent and DEC= Decision.

Result shown on table 3 above indicate that the mean scores for all the items were below the criterion mean of 2.50. The grand mean which is 2.23 and the SD which ranged between 0.56 to 0.94 is an indication that principals exercise their administrative autonomy to a low extent in terms of curriculum development and instructional programmes in secondary schools of Ebonyi State of Nigeria.

**Research Question 4:** To what extent does school principals exercise administrative autonomy in preparation of school calendar and schedule?

**Table 4:** Mean responses of the respondents on the extent principal exercise administrative autonomy in preparation of school calendar and schedules.

S/N	Item Statement	$\bar{x}$	SD	Decision
1	Exercise of autonomy in changing some school schedules in line with the school aim.	3.23	0.74	VHE
2	Exercise of autonomy in transferring and posting teachers to their related programmes.	2.12	0.49	HE
3	Exercise of autonomy in the planning of next school events.	2.56	1.00	HE
4	Principals exercise of autonomy in associating government and parents in the implementation of government school calendar.	2.56	1.00	HE
5	Exercise of autonomy in developing school timetable in line with government educational objectives.	3.22	0.71	VHE
6	Exercise of autonomy in ensuring that school activities are organized based on day and weeks.	2.70	0.75	HE
<b>Mean of Mean</b>		<b>2.73</b>	<b>0.76</b>	<b>HE</b>

**Key:** VHE = Very High Extent, HE= High Extent, LE= Low Extent, VLE= Very Low Extent and DEC= Decision.

Summary of result on table 4 reveals that all the items except item 2 have their mean scores above the criterion mean of 2.50. Also, the means of mean stood at 2.73 which are also above the criterion mean. The SD ranged between 0.49 to 1.00 which shows that it did not deviate from the control mean. This is an indication that principals exercise administrative autonomy in the preparation of school calendar and schedule to a great extent in secondary schools of Ebonyi State.

**Hypothesis**

**HO<sub>1</sub>:** Effective school administration does not significantly depend on extent principal’s exercised administrative autonomy in secondary schools in Ebonyi State.

**Table 5:** t-test of difference in the mean responses of teachers and principals on the extent school administration depend on principals exercise of administrative autonomy in the administration of secondary schools of Ebonyi State.

Variables	N	$\bar{x}$	SD	DF	t-cal	Alpha	t-crit	Decision
Teachers	610	2.61	0.65	708	1.62	0.05	1.96	Not significant
Principals	100	2.56	1.00					

**Note:** Variables = External factor built into the study, N= Number of respondents,  $\bar{x}$  = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation, DF = Degree of freedom, Alpha = Alpha Level of significance, t-crit = table value of t and Dec = Decision.

Summary of t-test difference on table 5 showed that both teachers and principals do not differ significantly in their opinions as it relates to the extent effective school administration depends on principals exercise of administrative autonomy in administration of secondary schools in Ebonyi State.

#### **IV. Discussion**

Summary of result of research question 1 which sought to find out the extent to which principals exercise autonomy in the administration of secondary schools as it relates to preparation of school budget revealed that principals do this to a low extent. These are as it divulged to decision making authority, drawing up of framework, proposing expenditure for school plan and among others. This agrees with the view of [16] who attributed the poor performance of principals in school administration to low level of autonomy exercised by school principals in school budgeting. He advised that principals should be afforded the opportunity to prepare the budget of their various school for improvement in school administration.

As shown on table 2, the school principals exercise administrative autonomy at a low extent especially as it concerns advising government on the areas teachers need training, re-training teachers for overall aim of improving instruction in the school system among others. Findings of this study are in agreement with the earlier reports of [19]. According to them, effective staff development is needed to help teachers learn and refine the instructional strategies, and in no way do principals as the head-teachers is involved in making decisions in this respect. They therefore, maintained that allowing some levels of autonomy for principals in decisions on staff development can enhance administrative performance in schools.

Again, on table 3, principals, exercise administrative autonomy to a low extent in terms of aligning of school content with the curriculum objectives, provision of guideline for instructional delivery. This finding is in line with [1] who noted that school management is always in battle with efforts to prepare learners for public examinations organized by such public examination among others. In a related manner, [7] pointed out that curriculum development in Nigeria is the sole responsibility of the research bodies such as the national examination research and development council (NERDC). According to him, this implies that principals have no hands in curriculum development in Nigeria, hence its cumbersome in implementation.

Summary of result on table 4 revealed to a high extent on principals exercise of administrative autonomy in preparation of school calendar and schedules. The reason for this may be because the principals knows the trend of things in their various school and so have to prepare the school calendar and schedules according to the prevailing circumstances so as to avoid conflict of time for schedules. [10] Agreed with the above statement when he noted that principals exercise of autonomy allows them a better understanding and appreciation of causes and effects relationship which invariably leads to remediation of principals, teachers and students instructional deficits. The one hypothesis for the study revealed that there was no significant difference between the mean responses of teachers and principals on the extent effective school administrative depends on principals exercise of administrative autonomy in secondary school in Ebonyi State.

#### **V. Recommendations**

From the findings of the study, the researcher made the following recommendations.

1. Government of Ebonyi State should give the secondary school principals an opportunity inform of granting them some level of autonomy to exercise especially in areas of school budgeting, staff professional development and curriculum development and instructional programmes.
2. Ebonyi State Ministry of Education should uphold the level of autonomy exercised by principals in preparation of school calendar and other schedules so as to maintain uniformity and consistency in the school system.
3. Principals should be allowed some level of autonomy to make some level of contribution in curriculum development and instructional programmes.

#### **VI. Conclusion**

The study sought to explore the extent principals exercise administrative autonomy in secondary school administration in Ebonyi State. It was discovered that principals exercise administrative autonomy in secondary schools to a low extent in terms of budget preparation, staff professional development, curriculum development and instructional programmes. However, it was also discovered that principals exercise administrative autonomy in secondary school to a high extent in preparation of school calendar and schedules. There were no significant differences in the mean opinions of teachers and principals and male and female principals on the extent effective school administration depends on principals exercise of administrative autonomy in administration of secondary school in Ebonyi State.

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