



BEST PRACTICES IN TEACHER EDUCATION AND EARLY CHILDHOOD LITERACY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Article Received on :

12/03/2013

Article revised from:

14/03/2013

Article accepted on:

02/05/2013

ABSTRACT

This paper highlights some of the best practices for teacher education and early childhood literacy education in Nigeria. The paper also discussed some strategies that can be used to improve teacher education in Nigeria. The paper concluded by suggesting that teacher education and early childhood literacy education can be enhanced by providing teachers with content knowledge throughout a pedagogy course and by placing teachers in training in classrooms where they can “apprentice” under the tutelage of an experienced teacher. The paper recommended among others, that teacher education programmes should be competency-based in order to attain, sustain and improve quality educational standards.

INTRODUCTION

The teacher is central to national development. He is the pivotal point around which all school programmes and activities evolve. The National Policy on Education (2009) acknowledges the significant role of teachers by making an opening statement on teacher education that says, “No education can rise above the quality of its teachers”. It is not an overstatement, therefore, to say that teachers are indispensable.

The expectations of parents, students, employers and the society at large of teachers have increased over the years. They claim that the whole world is doomed if teachers are apathetic, lazy, uncommitted, incompetent, uninspired, unmotivated, immoral and

anti-social. Nevertheless there is a decline in the quality of education. This is believed to be linked to a decline in the quality of teacher education and its effect on the teachers’ performance.

The fountain where teachers drink from is the teacher education. According to Otuka (2008), teacher education is the foundation for quality and relevance in education at all levels of education, pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary levels. The quality of education in a nation depends on the quality of teachers and the teachers’ quality depends on the quality of teacher education.

Teacher education has been defined by many authors, educationists and teachers. Osah-Ogulu (2002) describes teacher education as the strategic optional system for preparing and graduating teachers within the framework of institutional or public policy on education. Otuka (2008) asserts that teacher education equips teachers with the ethical, intellectual and emotional wherewithal to develop some range of qualities in the learner as determined by the society. Teacher education is the professional package designed for prospective teachers. It is a set of activities and experiences that prepare individuals for the purpose of teaching and learning.

Teacher education aims at producing teachers that have the ability to exercise intelligent appreciation of the world around them. A country without emphasis on teacher education will be passed by in global development and will find it very difficult to wriggle out of underdevelopment. Without effectiveness of teachers and the teacher education programme, there can be no meaningful national development. Teacher education must come at the top of every priority list of education and training.

Teacher Education for Basic Education: Current Scenario. The current scenario of teacher education and consequently of teachers in Nigeria is very gloomy low. This is attributable to a number of factors including the apparent confusion in the implementation of some recent innovations in teacher education in the country (Ukeje, 2000; Obanya, 2002, 2004).

At the primary education level, the defects of the Nigerian Certificate of Education programmes have become an obvious issue. Since the products of this scheme are expected to teach all the school subjects in their various primary school classes, the teacher at this level of education must have a sound knowledge of these subjects. However, NCE teachers are primarily prepared to teach at the upper primary level and the lower classes of the secondary school. In practice, most of the products of our NCE programmes are still teaching at all the levels of our secondary schools and

only very few are still teaching at all the levels of our primary schools.

In our secondary schools, one of the current problems of teacher education is the dichotomy in the pre-service education of graduate teachers operating at this level. Some trained through the four year concurrent degree programmes variously designated as B.Sc. Ed, B. A. Ed, and B. Ed. Other teachers are trained through the consecutive degree programmes of a total of five years post –school certificate duration. This is acclaimed to be superior in terms of academic content, but it has also been adjudged to produce less professionally motivated and oriented teachers. In fact, according to Ukeje (2000) it largely breeds birds of passages in the teaching profession.

Obanya (2002) reports that the existence of a variety of four year first degree programmes designated as B.Sc. (Ed.), B.A. (Ed.) and B.Ed. have ushered in inconsistent and uncoordinated degree programmes in this country. Some Universities designated their education degrees as B.Ed., whereas others make a distinction between degree programmes with academic teaching subjects and those in purely professional education disciplines. This prompted Ukeje's (2000) condemnation of the designation of professional four year degree programmes in education by our Universities in such fields as guidance and counselling, curriculum development, educational psychology and educational administration as B.Ed. degrees. Sometimes holders of such professional degrees in education are made to teach subjects in which they have no specialization.

At the tertiary level, educationists have observed that the current NCE programme is failing in the demands made of it in the 21st century democratic Nigeria (Ukeje, 2000; Obanya, 2002, 2004; Azeke, 2002). If NCE holders are to be effective they must have a sound knowledge of the entire NCE programme, a general academic component, a specialized academic component and a professional academic component improve the present situation.

Best Practices for improving Teacher Education In Nigeria

- Teachers are expected to display knowledge, professional skills and commitment to the societal function of education in a democratic society such as Nigeria. The teacher of 21st century Nigerian Society must have a good knowledge of his subject and the world around him. He must understand and appreciate the vision of the Nigerian nation for the next millennium and he must maintain parity in knowledge and esteem with the members of the other professions.
- The teacher has to devise ways to enable learners to make their own contributions in terms of bringing about positive changes in the Nigerian society. The teachers have to provide the learners with the skills to think for themselves and become practically oriented so that they can also take decisions. The teacher has to display a commitment to the societal function of education in a democratic society with a view to improving the lot of human condition.
- The University degree programmes in education should tally with the duration of the other professions such as law, medicine, architecture and engineering. Through the extension of the period for acquiring degrees in education in our Universities the dichotomy prevailing in the concurrent and consecutives degree programmes could be remedied.
- If quality educational standards are to be attained, sustained and improved in teacher education, then teacher education programmes should be competency-based. A number of top Nigerian academic educationists consider that the present teacher education programmes could be described as experience based (Baikie, 2002 Ukeje, 2000, Obanya, 2002, 2004, Ivowi, 2000; Azeke, 2002). However, students' experience might be superficial, trivial and transitory. It is often geared primarily around the need to obtain a certificate, while experience could all but be forgotten as soon as the certificate is obtained.

Best Practices in Early Childhood Literacy Education

The issue of best practice of literacy learning has been a matter of debate. Although some people believe that it is possible to have some best ways of teaching children's literacy in order to fully prepare them for the task ahead of them. Other educationists believe that best practice can not be stated down because of the individual differences among learners and also the method of teaching that largely depends on learning environment. The fact that best practice may not well be said to really be best, teachers can, come up with ways they feel they can help learners become better in literacy education and prepare children for further studies as they progress in their academic pursuit. In language and early childhood literacy and professional literature, there is a consensus around the following five best practices,

1. A Print-Rich environment
2. Integrated Language Experiences and explorations
3. Projects
4. Reading and Responding
5. Skills and Strategies

1. A Print-Rich environment

Books, Paper, writing tools, and functional signs and symbols have a central place in classrooms that support literacy development. Children are stimulated to use literacy when there are interesting things to write and read about and when they have access to writing tools to express themselves in symbolic form. Signs that have meaning for children are stimulated to use literacy when there are interesting things to write and read about and when they have access to writing tools to express themselves in symbolic form. Signs that have meaning for children (not mere decoration), books placed everywhere, play centers, a writing table with plenty of supplies, and a bulletin board for leaving written messages to another, or invite children to use writing and reading in open-ended ways. These learning environments communicate the important message that literacy is an integral part of daily activity.

It is not just enough to develop a literacy-enriched environment, however. Children also need time to use it. During free-activity time in one classroom, for example, the writing table has become a center for sharing and sending messages to friends. Children can write letters to one another and drop them in a covered shoebox made to look like a mailbox, to the absolute delight of their peers. These messages then can be displayed on a bulletin board in the writing corner at the children's eye level, so that the whole class can enjoy one another's writings.

Young children need opportunity for literacy-related play through exploring the uses of language and literacy routines associated with authentic everyday activities (Neumann & Roskos, 1990). A grocery store, restaurant, and doctor's office settings allow children to engage in playful attempts at literacy that are essentially risk-free. In these environments children feel in control and develop a sense of what writers and readers do long before they actually have the necessary skills and knowledge for writing or reading. Such feelings nourish their interest and desire to become literate and provide motivation for working toward learning how to write and read.

2. Integrated Language Experiences and Explorations

Children are driven to learn language and literacy not for its own sake, but for its functionality (Strickland & Morrow, 1989). They use their emerging skills to discover and explore their worlds. Engaging children in investigations that are in-depth studies of real topics, environments, and events-activities that are really worth their time and attention – should be a centerpiece of the a favorite pet is a far cry from curricula that focus on colors, seasons, or community workers. In the course of working on projects, children ask meaningful questions and find ways of representing their findings in multiple symbolic forms through talking, drawing, and writing.

Integrated language activities like these give children opportunities to work with other students having different skills and abilities. Activities may begin as

large-group lessons, like “How do we plant our own garden?” However, the real work begins as children work together in small-group investigations. In these situations one child's skill in drawing may complement another's ability to write on the computer, along with another who enjoys talking in front of a group. Such cooperative language and literacy activities provide critical opportunities for children to learn from each other.

3. Projects

Projects are slightly different from traditional theme-based instruction. Though they both emphasize integrated curricula, projects have goals that are established by the classroom community. Creating and maintaining a children's garden, for example, represents a clear and concrete goal for which young children can take credit and feel competent. Developing a Big Book that illustrates the many ancestries and cultures of children in the classroom brings special closure to a project that has involved them in writing letters to family across the world as they explored their multicultural roots. Projects like these actively engage children's minds (Katz & Chard, 1989), and allow them to practice what they know and use literacy for real-life purposes.

4. Reading and Responding

Listening to stories and discussing them as a group is a vital activity in early childhood classrooms (Newman, 1977). Children need experiences with a variety of texts: stories, predictable texts, and concept books among others. In many schools children actually prefer books about real things; they are eager to learn about how things work in their environment.

There are many ways to share stories. Some teachers like to begin with a song, a finger play, or a brief chant signaling that it is now time for stories. During the reading, the teacher will use her voice to convey meaning. Sometimes she will pause and ask questions, and other times she will simply read the book without stopping, enjoying the language and rhythm of the story. Following the story, the teacher will engage

children in responding in a variety of ways. Some like to reenact the story; others like to use participation techniques like student response cards; still others engage in group discussions followed by a retelling of the story using pictures and actual objects. All of these strategies enhance children's understanding and delight in hearing the language of print. And, as many teachers have found, children often want to hear the same story again and again until they have gained a sense of mastery of the story or topic.

It is critical for children not only to hear stories, but to have access to books themselves. After the story time, one pre-school teacher put a book in each child's hands and encouraged them to read independently. Another teacher, concerned at first that children would rip pages, involved the group in a page-turning activity, "Over, up, and flip". Once the teacher was confident that the books would not be destroyed, she put some of their favorites in the library corner and watched with fascination how the children carefully turned the pages and pretended to read along with their friends. Library corners need to be in a central part of the room, with comfortable beanbag chairs, library pockets with take-out cards, lots of stuffed animals and pictures, and a repair kit in case a scribble appears on a page.

5. Skills and Strategies

In literacy-enriched classrooms, reading and writing become a part of the culture i.e the way in which most information is communicated throughout the day. Skill and strategy teaching occur as children are engaged in meaningful activity. Through their finger plays, songs, and chants, they will begin to hear similarities and differences in language; through listening to stories they will pick up new vocabulary and after a while, through writing, many will discover and differentiate print from pictures. However, some children will need explicit, direct instruction in skills and strategies. They will need to see alphabetic letters isolated to better capture their shape, size, and form. Some will need to be shown how to write their names and favorite words. Such explicit instruction is an important part of

teaching in early child-hood classrooms. Learning new skills helps children develop a sense of competence and accomplishment, leading toward greater independence in learning.

Much attention has been drawn to concerns about isolated skill teaching, in which children are drilled on workbooks pages at too young an age. Although the author is of the opinion that these activities are clearly inappropriate for young children, it should not suggest that all direct, skill based instruction should be abandoned. Sometimes this skill teaching is referred to as "vitamin pill activities". Teaching children a word family by saying the word at and asking them to put the letter p. then f. then m before it on a worksheet does not turn them into robots; on the contrary, it is likely to teach them many different words and sounds over time. It is important for us to adjust our teaching strategies to meet the children's needs and not our own. It is the wise and child-focused teacher who will adjust his or her teaching to meet this challenge.

These guidelines and suggested practices embrace an attitude of inquiry rather than prescription that results in a broader and more inclusive approach to early literacy instruction. Implicit in this view is the assumption that any approach to early literacy development must begin by asking, who is this child? What kinds of experiences has he or she had? Guided by a set of basic guidelines of good practice, teachers tailor instructional practices and teaching to their children, creating integral connections between these earliest experiences and long-term literacy development tied to contexts and activities that have personal meaning and value to them. Responding to the challenge of diversity defines both the hard work and the exhilarating rewards of early literacy teaching not identification, with the participants. It is the view of this author that the adoption of a wide range of research methodologies, both within and across studies, offers greater opportunity to fathom the complexities of learning to teach and the effects of various forms of support on both teacher and student learning.

Recommendations

The following are some recommendations that can improve the teaching of reading in schools.

1. Teachers should take a leadership role in building a research agenda for teacher preparation in reading. The paucity of research in the area of reading in teacher education is disturbing given the large numbers of reading researchers who spend a good portion of their daily lives immersed in teacher preparation. It is becoming increasingly clear that, if reading teacher educators don't take initiative and responsibility for setting a research agenda, someone else will.
2. Teachers should create critical spaces for dialogue, deliberation, discussion, and debates regarding reading teacher education research. This is not a call for a new organization as much as it is a challenge for those in the reading teacher education community to become more visible and more active in research within existing structures such as Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN), International Reading Association (IRA).
3. Teachers should get started on a database for reading teacher education. As a profession of reading educators, one knows too little about the range of programmes operating nationally and around the world-their characteristics, course work patterns, course content, instruction, internship experiences, and enrollments in reading education course. Without accurate, up-to-date information about the nature and impact of our programs, we have difficulty countering high profile claims made by individuals pushing a particular policy agenda. With these data, we can begin to establish the benchmarks for our reform efforts.
4. Teachers should develop better tools to assess the impact of teacher education. Effort should be made in expanding the repertoire of measures available to examine reading acquisition, and better conceptual frameworks for understanding the acquisition process. Our search for better

frameworks must include an account of how teacher learning improves student learning.

5. Teachers should listen carefully and respond to the concerns of the public and policymakers. As scholars of reading education, we certainly need to take the lead in setting our own research agenda. The public wants better schools, and they see teacher education as an important level for school improvement. Any hesitancy on our part in studying this critical linkage will (and should) be viewed with suspicion by a public uncertain about our capacity to contribute solutions to our educational problems.
6. Teachers should make electronic texts a viable part of our curriculum and pedagogy in reading teacher education. We cannot expect in our elementary classrooms what we fail to use in our own work. Research on how reading teacher education can be enhanced through the use of electronic media and texts must accompany our programme development efforts.
7. Teachers should place issues of diversity at the top of the priority list for research it is simply unacceptable that a vastly disproportionate number of minority students fail to learn to read. It is even more unacceptable that so many majority teachers possess so little knowledge about cultural and linguistic diversity. Teachers may not be the sole source of the problem but they can and must become part of the solution through collaboration between university faculty, classroom teachers, and teacher trainees to link theory and practice; and field experiences that occur throughout a teacher preparation programme.

CONCLUSION

Teacher Education and Early Childhood Literacy Education can be enhanced by providing teachers with content knowledge throughout a pedagogy course and by placing teachers in training in classrooms where they can "apprentice" under the tutelage of an experienced teacher. Teachers in training should practice to teach", and use methods similar to those of the experienced teacher.

The suggestions made regarding best practices in this paper cannot be said to be exhaustive and ultimate, considering a lot of factors especially around the Nigerian child and teacher. It is therefore better to find a common ground (as the author of this paper has highlighted) rather than having best practices across the globe. This is so because learners and teachers in developed and under-developed countries vary in their level of perceptions. Teachers should therefore, be dynamic in their approaches since they are ultimately in the best position to bring principle into practice in a meaningful way for their learners.

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