

TOWARDS A FUNCTIONAL SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION IN NIGERIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

The current vision of Education in most countries of the world is the development of individuals who would participate effectively in national development processes. This paper mirrors the present status of Social Studies education in primary schools, highlighting major areas of defect that have prevented the realisation of stated goals. It suggests practical steps to be taken so that through primary social studies education the desired kind of citizens is created that would contribute maximally to the growth and survival of Nigeria as a nation in the 21st century.

Introduction

The process of education involves the socialization of individuals to become an integral part of the society in which they live. Through education individuals are trained to acquire knowledge, useful skills, desirable values, attitudes and habits to adjust themselves to the changing conditions of the world in which they live. According to Fafunwa (1974), functionality was the watchword of traditional African education. This system of education was largely participatory in nature preparing the child for life in the society. Modern education practices is expected to follow the same line. This is why the National Policy on Education (1998) endorsed education as an instrument par excellence for promoting national development. Indeed the philosophy of Nigerian education is based on the

- (i) development of the individual into a sound and effective citizen;
- (ii) full integration of the individual into the community; and
- (iii) the provision of equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens of the country at primary, secondary and tertiary levels both inside and outside the school system.

Primary education is believed to hold the key to the success or failure of the whole educational system because it lays the foundation on which other levels of education is built. This level of education is expected to be free, universal and compulsory. Social studies is one of the curricular offerings provided at this level. After almost two decades of the implementation of the provisions of the National Policy on Education, there is a general dissatisfaction among social studies educators as to the functionality of primary social studies education. This paper highlights areas of dissatisfaction in primary social studies education with a view to focusing how to improve its relevance to the Nigerian child and nation in the 21st century.

Primary Education in Nigeria

Primary education in Nigeria refers to the education given in institutions for children aged 6 to 11 plus. The average learner takes about six years to go through education at this level. The goals of primary education are to:

- i) inculcate permanent literacy and numeracy and ability to communicate effectively;
- (ii) lay a sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking; (jii) Give citizenship education as a basis for effective participation in and contribution to the life of the society;
- v) mould the character and develop sound attitudes and morals in the child;
- (v) develop in the child the ability to adapt to the changing environment;
- (vi) give the child opportunities for developing manipulative skills that will enable him to function effectively in the society within the limits of his capacity;
- vii) provide the child with basic tools for further educational advancement including preparation for trades and crafts of the locality (NPE, 1998:13).

To accomplish these goals, pupils are to be exposed to several curricular offerings practically using exploratory and experimental methods. The vision behind these goals is to produce pupils who are worthy and competent and are willing to work for the promotion of a progressive, united and self-reliant nation. However, primary education have not been lifted to this realm of expectation. This is basically due to the fact that education at this level is highly academic and theoretical divorced from the life and aspirations of the people it is supposed to serve. Thus, Saka (2003) opines that curriculum implementation in the primary schools is mainly on paper. According to him, the system still reflect

the old conventional curriculum which emphasizes rote learning and memorization of facts by pupils. This approach to education cannot change behaviour in the desired direction and prepare learners for life in the society. This is the background in which social studies operate expected to make an impact on the lives of pupils by reflecting changing societal needs, problems and aspirations.

Primary Social Studies Education

The National Social Studies Committee set up by the Nigeria Educational and Research Council (NERC) endorsed Social Studies to be:

Those common learning of man's interaction with his social and physical environment It is not only a study but a way of life of how man influences and is influenced by his physical, social, political, economic, psychological and cultural environments (NERC, 1981:2).

Dubey et al (1980) considers Social Studies as:

The investigation of human activities which studies man at home, at work, at worship, in politics, at play, in the village, everywhere engaged in his busy programme of living.

A common strand discernible in these definitions is that social studies focus on man and his problems arising from his being and from his interaction with his social and physical environment. Indeed, its introduction in Nigerian schools is a response to the national call to society's problems. Being a problem-oriented discipline, it is expected to help learners study and learn about the problems of survival in the environment. According to ASESP (1994) the primary purpose of primary social studies teaching is to help develop young people to make informed and reasoned decisions for public good as citizens of a culturally inter-dependent world. Specifically, primary social studies education must develop

- (i) children's self confidence and initiative based on an understanding of their own accomplishment and potentialities and their own worth;
- (ii) their power of imagination and resourcefulness;
- (iii) their desire for knowledge and continued learning;
- iv) their appreciation of the dignity of man and of liberty;
- (v) their sense of compassion for the less fortunate;
- (vi) their sense of respect for and tolerance of the opinions of others even in disagreement;
- (vii) their willingness to accept necessary changes within a system of law and order deriving from the will of the people;
- (viii) such attitudes as are favourable to social, physical, cultural and economic development which will enable the children to participate in the life of the community and when they leave school, to become innovators and doers of good in society;
- (ix) social attitudes and values such as co-operation, participation, inter-dependence on others, open-mindedness, honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, diligence, obedience;
- (x) a spirit of national consciousness and patriotism through interest and involvement in our local, national and world heritage; and
- (xi) the creation of their social awareness and critical judgement as well as constructive effective thinking (Dubey and Barm, 1981:6-7).

In the preamble explaining these primary social studies objectives, teachers are told to provide opportunities for pupils in the instructional process to be creative. They are to allow pupils explore, investigate and take responsibility for their learning.

According to ASESP (1994), the following characterize primary social studies education:

- (i) It is integrative, adopting the inter-disciplinary approach to learning.
- (ii) It encourages reflective thinking about societal problems in the hope of finding rational and realistic solutions to them.
- (iii) It goes all out to encourage appreciation of the environment through development of knowledge, requisite skills and positive values and actions.
- (iv) It is citizenship education preparing pupils to assume their shared citizenship rights and responsibilities as the world of knowledge and experience expands.

From the above it is obvious that the curriculum package of primary social studies is expected to provide pupils with insight into the utilization of knowledge derived from a variety of sources for meaningful living in society (Okam, 1998). However, several studies have revealed the classroom mal-functioning of Social Studies education in primary schools resulting in the non-achievement of stated goals.

Major Defects Of Primary Social Studies Education

Despite the noble goals of social studies teaching, certain unsalutary experiences stand as grievous hindrances to the vision and mission of education in the 21st century. These are portrayed in the following areas:

1. Unclear and inadequate vision of the nature and underlying philosophy of primary social studies education.

Social studies as an integrated area of study is taught for the express purpose of promoting and practicing effective problem-solving and decision making. But, out of ignorance most teachers present its content as if they are teaching the discrete social science subjects like history and geography, thereby compartmentalizing knowledge. Makinde (1979); ASESP (1994) and Okan (1998) argue that the integrated approach to learning is adopted because it is the natural way of life experiences as man interacts with his environment. By not adopting this wholistic manner to learning, teachers simply encourage rote learning where pupils simply memorise and regurgitate bits and pieces of information with no possibility of transfer into practical life situations.

2. The application of faulty teaching methodology: Social studies is not taught purely for the acquisition of knowledge. Pupils are expected to be exposed to learning experiences that would promote the basic citizenship skills of knowledge through the processing of information, examining of values and beliefs and active participation in society, ASESP (1994). Okan (1998) while expressing dissatisfaction of primary social studies instructional process opines that Social Studies by virtue of its nature is value-laden. It raises ethical, moral, philosophical issues in the discussion of societal issues and processes. Therefore, adopting the traditional modes of teaching which is basically expository prevents pupils from becoming seekers of knowledge for themselves and active problem solvers for the benefits of the nation. The social studies class is expected to be activity-oriented through the adoption of problem-solving techniques that would lead them into inquiry and exploration to develop their imagination and creativity.
3. Another defective area centres on the inadequate and inappropriate selection and use of resource materials to promote teaching and learning, ASESP (1994) states that individuals learn and remember 80% of what they experience and practice and 90% of what they attempt to teach others." A picture is said to be worth a thousand words. Most primary social studies classes limit pupils to just the class textbook which may not even be available for all of them. The community is not used to provide life experiences or other materials to appeal to the varied senses of learners. This approach makes learning abstract and alienated preventing pupils from seeing relationships between school experiences and life in the wider society.

The application of faulty evaluation procedures: Apparently as a result of the examination and certification conscious educational system practiced in Nigeria, primary social studies teachers use inadequate evaluation procedures to collect and ascertain data on pupil's growth and development in all the areas of learning. Evaluation is restricted to assessing the extent to which cognitive learning outcomes are attained to a near total neglect of the psycho-motor and affective learning outcomes. This is a great disservice to Social Studies and Education generally in Nigeria. Social studies is largely an affective subject. As such evaluation procedures cannot be restricted to tests and examinations. Current assessment procedures in schools is expected to emphasize performance in terms of how pupils have learned and can utilize learning in practical adult decision-making situations, Armstrong and Savage (1996). For instance, Stiggins (1994) opines that authentic or performance assessment encourages the development of sophisticated thinking on the part of pupils. Thus Badmus (2003) opines that assessment procedures must change to fit into the changing perception and purposes of education which is essentially to prepare members of the society for national development purposes. Yet, Primary Social Studies assessment of achievement falls below this expectation.

5. Personality and preparation of the primary Social Studies teacher: The personality of any teacher is influenced by his training, his understanding of the nature of pupils and how he views teaching and learning. Most primary Social Studies teachers are ill-prepared professionally (Saka, 2003). According to Akinbode (1981) in NERC (1981), the primary social studies teacher is a parent-substitute ensuring a smooth transition from home to school. He is expected to possess attributes of the 3 domains of learning, be national in outlook, current and confident, perceiving teaching as a human process. However, due to inadequate training primary social studies teachers do not portray the qualities that distinguish them from other teachers. In this situation, they prove to be unworthy models who cannot monitor pupils for higher national service.

The Way Forward

Since Social Studies is committed to the creation of effective citizens, urgent steps need to be taken to make it relevant to the vision and mission of education in the 21st century. Since teachers are the chief implementers of the curriculum, efforts should be made to re-organise teacher education programmes to equip primary teachers with the needed professional competence. In-service training programmes with adequate motivation also need to be organised for practicing teachers to sharpen their teaching skills

Professional social studies associations like SOSAN must take the lead in organising conferences and workshops to clarify the true nature and philosophy of social studies education in Nigeria primary schools. Such workshops should design activities to introduce teachers to the unit approach to planning to further educate the teachers on how issues are presented in the instructional process. Since the art of teaching is a complex human activity, teachers of primary social studies should use a variety of teaching methods and techniques to introduce new life and promote the inquiry spirit in the primary social studies classroom. This should be done with an understanding of the children put in their care. The community as the living resource centre and social studies laboratory must be used to provide real-life experiences to pupils. Governmental and non-governmental organisations and agencies should provide financial resources and non-financial assistance to enable the primary social studies teacher organise field-trips, invite/visit resource persons and even mobilise pupils for participation in community development activities.

Evaluation procedures adopted in primary social studies classes should be goal-directed, comprehensive, continuous and co-operative. This will keep all stake-holders alive to their responsibilities.

There is also need for constant review of the primary social studies curriculum to keep it abreast with the changing needs and aspirations of the nation.

These suggestions indeed calls for an over-hauling of the traditional approach to Social Studies teaching. Only a co-operative approach of all stake-holders in Social Studies education would yield fruitful results.

Conclusion

Teaching is not the mere giving out of instruction. It is a process that should lead to change in the behaviour of learners in the desired direction for individual and societal good. Social Studies is for integrated concept learning, problem-solving and decision-making. It stresses nation-building by emphasizing the history, traditions values and beliefs of a nation; as well as the sense of a broader view of citizenship. These features of Social Studies need to be fully appreciated for the necessary operational modalities to be put in place for its effective implementation. Anything contrary to this opens both the pupils and the entire nation to future risk and danger.

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