Preparing Teachers for Diversity in the Classroom: Implications for Teacher Education in Nigeria

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Abstract
One of the major challenges of teacher education in Nigeria today and indeed the world over is that of preparing teachers for diversity in the classroom. Several issues that are important for inclusion in any teacher education curriculum regarding diversity studies are elucidated in this article. The framing question of the discussion is: What are some relevant conceptions regarding issues of diversity that every teacher education programme should consider including in its curriculum? Diversity in the classroom is seen by this paper as a source of strength rather than a problem for teacher education. In this regard, while the paper identifies some of the problems of teacher education in Nigeria, it insists that valuing diversity is one of the most important roles a teacher must fill. Hence, the paper makes recommendations on specific roles of teachers in a diverse classroom and the strategies that could help teachers manage diversity. The paper concludes by advising teachers to consider the importance of becoming conscious of their thinking habits in the class. It consequently encourages them to begin to evolve into diversity conscious competent educators.

Nigeria is a country of diverse peoples and cultures. The beauty of the Nigerian state lies in the diversity of its people. In order to ensure the survival of the Nigerian nation with its diverse people, educating the young and future generations becomes an imperative for the nation. Indeed, as Schaefer (2000:112) remarked, “no group can survive unless its new members are encouraged to learn and accept its values and customs”. Grutek also made similar observation when he noted that “to survive,
preliterate people developed skills that grew into cultural and educational patterns and in order to continue to the future, a particular group had to transmit its culture or pass it on, from adults to children”. These points highlight the importance of education in a nation’s life.

However, educating the diverse people of Nigeria presents enormous challenges for both teachers and planners of the teacher education programmes. This is because of pluralistic nature of the Nigerian nation. A well planned teacher education programme that can address the diversity of Nigeria should have the capacity to enable the student teachers adopt a truly global perspective in the teaching and learning process. This implies that culturally and linguistically diverse students and their parents or guardians are now seen as resources that provide unparalleled opportunities for enrichment.

The basic question then is whether the current teacher education programme of Nigeria is well structured to meet the above challenge? The current wave of Boko Haram attacks, religious intolerance and inter/intra-ethnic clashes in Nigeria are concrete proofs that the Nigerian teacher education programme has not adequately prepared Nigerian teachers to deal with this diversity. This is based on the assertion contained in the national policy on education to the effect that “no nation can rise above the quality of its teachers. This paper is an attempt to examine the above trend and possible strategies to be adopted to prepare our teachers for diversity in the classroom.

**Conceptual Clarifications**

In order to do justice to this paper, it has become expedient that to clarify the following key operational concepts.

a. **Education**

According to Azubuike (2012: 5), “education is a multidimensional activity that is targeted at all round development of man. It integrates diverse programmes that address diverse aspects of human life”. For Ibezim (2001:1), education means the training of the mind and character for effective performance. Going further, he identified four perspectives of education from his reading of Mkpa (1990: 44). According to this categorization, education is seen as a discipline, an enterprise, a product and a system. Elliot (1949: 98) aptly sums up the necessity for education in a society when he defines education as, “a process by which the community seeks to open its life to all individuals within it and enables them to take part in it”.

From the foregoing, education is seen “as any process by which an individual gains knowledge or insight or develops attitudes or skills useful for his existence” (Azubike, 2012: 4).

b. **Teacher Education**

According to Williams (YEAR), teacher education is any of the formal programmes that have been established for the preparation of teachers at the elementary and secondary
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school levels”. On its part, UNESCO (2005) views teacher education as addressing “environmental, social and economic contexts to create locally relevant and culturally appropriate teacher education programmes for both pre-service and in-service teachers”. Going further, it adds that it generally includes four elements namely,

a. Improving the general educational background of the trainee teachers;
b. Increasing their knowledge and understanding of the subjects they are to teach;
c. Pedagogy and understanding of children and learning;
d. The development of practical skills and competencies

In a related development, UNESCO also explains that the benefits of having teacher education institutions include the following:

a. To educate new teachers;
b. To provide professional development for practising in-service teachers by updating their knowledge and skills;
c. To provide teacher education curricula;
d. To carry out research;
e. To contribute to textbooks;
f. Provide expert advice to local schools upon requests; and
g. To educate and certify headmasters, principals and school administrators.

c. Diversity

The concept, diversity, is viewed in this paper as understanding that each individual is unique, and recognizing our individual differences. These can be along the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies. It is the exploration of these differences in a safe, positive, and nurturing environment. For the Merriam Webster Dictionary, diversity is “the condition of having or being composed of differing elements variety; especially: the inclusion of different types of people (as people of different races or cultures) in a group or organization”.

Teacher Education in Nigeria

Nigeria’s National Policy on Education (2004:39) insists that all teachers in educational institutions in Nigeria shall be professionally trained and teacher education programmes shall be structured to equip teachers for effective performance of their duties. In this regard, it listed the following as the goals of teacher education:

a. Produce highly motivated, conscientious and efficient classroom teachers for all levels of our educational system;
b. Encourage further the spirit of inquiry and creativity in teachers;
c. Help teachers to fit into social life of the community and the society at large and enhance their commitment to national goals;
d. Provide teachers with the intellectual and professional background adequate for their assignment and make them adaptable to changing situations; and

e. Enhance teachers’ commitment to teaching profession.

Similarly, the following institutions were listed as official institutions for the purposes of acquiring teacher education:

a. Colleges of Education;
b. Faculties of Education;
c. Institutes of Education;
d. National Teachers’ Institute;
e. Schools of Education in the Polytechnics
f. National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN);
g. National Mathematical Centre (NMC)

Problems of Teacher Education in Nigeria

Perraton, Creed and Robinson (2002) identify the following as some of the problems of teacher education globally:

a. Inadequate access to education;
b. Poor teacher/student ratios;
c. Teacher quality;
d. Insufficient/lack of teacher continuing professional development programmes;
e. Lack of research on the Limitations of current teacher education programme.

A cursory look at the above problems clearly shows that they are indeed plaguing the Nigerian teacher education programme. Hence, it becomes expedient that relevant authorities concerned with educational planning and administration must take urgent steps to address the above problems to ensure improvement in the quality of the teacher education programme.

Educating in a Diverse Society: The Role of the Teacher

Education in a diverse society like Nigeria is supposed to be a source of strength for the teacher instead of being a problem. Indeed as Saravia-Shore (2008:41) remarks;

The broad range of experiences and perspectives brought to school by culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse students offer a powerful resource for everyone to learn more in different ways, in new environments, and with different types of people. Every single person in this enormously diverse and ever-changing system has the power to serve as an invaluable resource for all others—students, teachers, and the community as a whole.

Hence, the teacher has great roles to play in managing diversity in the classroom. Shedding more light on this, the Nondestructive Testing (NDT) Resource Centre notes that “teachers must provide students with an environment that is conducive...
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to learning. If a student feels uncomfortable, unsafe, or not respected; then their chances of success in that class dramatically decrease”. In its view, as our society becomes more diverse, it is important that students learn to value and use diversity to the greater good. Teachers already have a number of roles in the classroom; yet, valuing diversity is one of the most important ones a teacher must fill. Following from the above, it listed the following as the role of the teacher in managing diversity:

1. Teachers must take the time to learn about their students' background, interests, and learning style. This will allow them to create an environment that is conducive to each individual student.
2. Teachers should allow time for the students to learn about each other and gain an appreciation for the diversity they bring to the classroom.
3. Teachers should remind them how boring it would be if we were all alike and there were no differences among us to make each person unique.
4. Teachers should teach students that everyone has strengths and weaknesses. When working in teams encourage students to take advantage of the strengths of the team members in order to produce the best possible results.
5. Teachers should bring in different people to the class as resources that students might be able to connect with.
6. Teachers ought to search out people that are different from themselves and that might share certain qualities with their students. Students need role models. Many times when they see they are connected in some way to a person they will be more apt to listen and learn from them.
7. Teachers should never tolerate bullying, teasing, and other put-down behaviour at any time in the classroom.
8. Teachers must implement a "zero tolerance" for anything that is disrespectful, hurtful, or intolerant of diversity.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that rather than constituting a problem for students and educators, the growing diversity in classrooms necessitates and encourages the development and use of diverse teaching strategies designed to respond to each student as an individual. In this regard, it becomes expedient to state that diversity in the class requires that the teacher education programme should be widened to enable the student teachers appreciate the beauty of diversity and take that into account in the choice of instructional materials and examples used in the class. It is within this framework that one could understand the philosophy behind Davis’ (2013) view to the effect that there are no universal solutions or specific rules for responding to ethnic, gender, and cultural diversity in the classroom. However, she suggests the following principles to guide the teacher in diverse society like Nigeria:

1. Recognize any biases or stereotypes you may have absorbed;
2. Treat each student as an individual, and respect each student for who he or she is;
3. Rectify any language patterns or case examples that exclude or demean any groups,
4. Do your best to be sensitive to terminology that refers to specific ethnic and cultural groups as it changes;
5. Get a sense of how students feel about the cultural climate in your classroom. Tell them that you want to hear from them if any aspect of the course is making them uncomfortable;
6. Introduce discussions of diversity at department meetings;
7. Become more informed about the history and culture of groups other than your own;
8. Convey the same level of respect and confidence in the abilities of all your students;
9. Don’t try to “protect” any group of students. Don’t refrain from criticizing the performance of individual students in your class on account of their ethnicity or gender; And be evenhanded in how you acknowledge students’ good work;
10. Whenever possible, select texts and readings whose language is gender-neutral and free of stereotypes, or cite the shortcomings of material that does not meet these criteria;
11. Aim for an inclusive curriculum that reflects the perspectives and experiences of a pluralistic society;
12. Do not assume that all students will recognize cultural, literary or historical references familiar to you;
13. Bring in guest lecturers to foster diversity in your class;
14. Give assignments and exams that recognize students’ diverse backgrounds and special interests.

In a related development, a study by Pratt-Johnson (2006) shows that teachers will deal better with diversity if they are acquainted with the following cultural differences associated with teaching a diverse classroom;

a. **Ways of Knowing**

In her view, there are differences in the sources of information available to people within a given cultural milieu. In some cultures, information is gathered through intensive research in libraries and on the Internet for example, in the United States. In Nigeria today, people access information through "non-academic" sources for example, through elders, nature, spirits, or symbols, the social media, age grades, town unions, elders, market organizations among others. These cultures appreciate evidence that can be measured and documented through such media. Some cultures do not have the same quantity and quality of experience with books or similar forms of research.
b. **Ways of Solving Problems**

Cultures have different ways of solving problems. For Pratt-Johnson (2006:5), “it is surprising that given the same set of problems and circumstances, cultures can arrive at very different solutions. Cultures reason differently and arrive at solutions based on their distinctive values, philosophy and beliefs”. In Nigeria for instance, the various cultures have different internal mechanisms for problem solving. The people either consult their spiritual leaders or resort to traditional institutions.

C. **Ways of Communicating Non-verbally**

Cultures have different ways of communicating non-verbally, and it is crucial for teachers to be aware of these differences. In a class that is culturally diverse, any or all of the following might be observed in the classroom: children who will not make direct eye contact when talking to a teacher, because to do so would show lack of respect in their culture; children who smile not because they are happy but because they are embarrassed or do not understand and are afraid to ask questions; others who rarely smile, such as students from Korea: "In Korean culture, smiling signals shallowness and thoughtlessness. The Korean attitude toward smiling is expressed in the proverb, 'the man who smiles a lot is not a real man” (Dresser, 1996).

c. **Ways of Learning**

Generally speaking, different cultures also learn in different ways. Classrooms in such cases can be student-centered, with the teacher as a facilitator. In some cultures, however, the teacher is always the center of class activities, the sole authority figure. Sometimes, students do not even dare to ask questions, as to do so would challenge the teacher's authority. There are no collaborative activities in such classrooms, and students are required to memorize pages and pages of information that they subsequently restate on written tests.

d. **Ways of Dealing with Conflict**

Conflict is a fact of life. It is in observing how people deal with and react to conflicts that we see clear differences between cultures. Some cultures view conflict as a positive thing, while others view it as something to be avoided. In the United States, conflict is not usually desirable; nonetheless, conventional wisdom in this country encourages individuals to deal directly with conflicts when they do arise. In fact, face-to-face encounters are usually suggested as the way to work through whatever problems exist. By contrast, in many Asian countries, open conflict is experienced as embarrassing or demeaning.
f. Ways of Using Symbols

In the multicultural school setting, symbols that are unique to various cultures should be correctly understood and interpreted. Otherwise, problems can arise. One case in point occurred in an elementary school in New York City. A math teacher asked her students to embellish their math portfolios by drawing pictures to accompany them. She was incensed when she saw her young student from India drawing what she thought was a swastika. Furious, she took the student’s "artwork" and ripped it in half in front of the whole class! Subsequently, she learned from another teacher at the school, a Hindu, that what had looked to her like a swastika was actually a sacred symbol of wisdom that Hindus throughout the world have used for thousands of years!

Conclusion

As John Powell rightly noted, “a human loner is a contraction in terms”. The existence of a human in isolation from others is like a plant trying to survive without sunlight, or water. No new growth can occur, and life that does exist begins to wither and will die slowly. In the same manner, our contemporary world is a world that consists of people of diverse colours, languages, physical abilities, and religious affiliations among others. Nigeria as a nation presents a picture of the diverse nature of our world. Apart from the fact that Nigerians are of the same colour, like the peoples of the world, they are equally divided along religious, ethnic, cultural, political affiliations. Teacher education in Nigeria must therefore, take cognizance of the diversity of the Nigerian people in the framing of its programmes and policies. The significant others are important in the process of the education of a child. If truly we want to have a united Nigeria, then we must begin with the teachers because no nation can rise above the quality of its teachers. Teachers are nation builders, if we want our children to grow up in a world free from bias and discrimination, to reach for their dreams and feel that whatever they want to accomplish in life is possible, then we must get the teachers to teach them the values inherent in diversity.

Teacher education must be restructured to produce culturally sensitive teachers who in turn will instill the values of cultural diversity on the Nigerian children. As professionals who partner with families to nurture young children, teachers must be careful with their thinking, their utterances and examples that they present to the learners when topics such as race and racism, cultural differences, language and bilingualism, religions of the world and the countless questions that arise in a world where these issues have such a powerful place in children's lives are raised. If Boko Haram, inter/intra ethnic problems facing Nigeria are to become things of the past, teacher education must be repositioned to respond to the challenges of our diverse country.
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Recommendations
In the light of the foregoing discussions, it is hereby recommended that teacher education programmes in order to respond to the challenges of diversity in Nigeria must;

1. Adopt a greater repertoire of approaches to teaching and learning to cope with varied styles of learning;
2. Structured to enable student teachers cultivate interpersonal skills and respect for other cultures;
3. In line with demands of the new world economy, recognize that our markets and economic competition are now global, and the skills of intercultural communication are necessary in politics, diplomacy, economics, environmental management, the arts, and other fields of human endeavor;
4. View a diverse classroom as the ideal laboratory to learn the multiple perspectives required by a global society and to put to use information concerning diverse cultural patterns;
5. Encourage their students who learn to work and play collaboratively with classmates from various cultures in order to better prepare them for the world they face now, and the world they will face in the future;
6. Promote only those teaching and learning strategies that draw on the social history and the everyday lives of students as they are the best tools that can assist the learning process;
7. Ensure that its admission policies are structured to enhance admission of students from diverse backgrounds so that the students can develop cross-cultural skills in a culturally and linguistically diverse classroom;
8. Instill into teachers the attitudes, knowledge, and skills to make their classrooms effective learning environments for all students. Given the opportunity, students can participate in learning communities within their schools and neighborhoods and be ready to assume constructive roles as workers, family members, and citizens in a global society.

References

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