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CLUSTER INSERVICE TEACHER PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT PROGRAMME; A STRATEGY FOR STAFF DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The paper focused on the central role of the teacher in qualitative Education delivery and took a cursory glance at the inability of the centralized in-service programme which relies on the multiplier approach mechanism to meet with the pervading reforms and challenges in our educational system where emphasis is now on teachers who are reflective practitioners with sufficient subject matter knowledge and a grasp of a range of practical approaches to the art of teaching/learning. The paper also presented a perspective on why in-service teacher professional development programmes that are facilitated locally, school – based, long-term, collaborative, actively involving all teachers, and use as a matter of central importance teachers own knowledge of their practice and the realities of their classroom and school's that take place in schools and cluster of schools, are now favoured and widely implemented in the advanced world and are being contemplated as potent professional support programmes for teachers in developing nations like Nigeria.

Keywords: cluster, staff development, in-service, professional support.

INTRODUCTION

Researches on teacher education development show the strategic importance of the teacher as a critical factor in qualitative Education delivery and in nation building. This is because the teacher is the fulcrum and the main determinant of the educational system. It is the teacher that can lay a foundation for National development because on the teacher depends the ultimate realization of the aims of education and in the process of social change and in nation building, the teacher is the builder of the builders (Okeke 1986). This undisputable position of the teacher was affirmed by Prof. Jack Allen of the George Peabody College of teachers USA in Ukeje (1996).

"One of the prime functions of the school, indeed the chief function is to provide a setting within which boys and girls can grow intellectually. This can be accomplished through the learners association with information, knowledge and facts. Books can help, so can libraries and laboratories and so can numerous other types of learning materials. But always there stand the teacher, always on the stage, often front and centre. What he knows can make a difference, what he does not know can be an irreparable loss.

Nigeria as a country has been bedeviled by socio-political problems that have taken their toll on the economy, education and every facets of the country's polity. Prolonged political instability resulting from incessant coups, frequent break in school calendar as a result of striking labour unions and teachers, corruption at every rung of the bureaucratic ladder, depressed economy and heavy external debt burden are bound to affect educational policies. In the context of these, teacher Education institutions cannot plan and execute their programmes as effectively and desirably as they should. It is therefore hard to deny that contents of school curricula and management are not compromised in the education of teachers leading to the production of half-baked teachers lacking in pedagogical competence. Changes in educational policies have led to changes in school structures, curriculum and instructional methods in use in Nigeria schools. As a result teachers and school administrators are constantly faced with the problem of managing a new structure different from the one in use in their pre-service training. Further more these changing structure and curricular coupled with changing educational policies make new demands on teachers and school administrators. Sugrue and Day (2002) encapsulate the present demand on the teacher and other stakeholders involved in qualitative education delivery thus; constant and increasing pressure on teachers, school leaders, administrators, policy makers and researchers to construct new understanding, insights, and practices to bring about transformation in the school organisation while simultaneously inventing more appropriate, efficient and effective approaches to teaching and learning consonant with individual needs, national aspirations and economic competitiveness ... increasing pressure on teacher, to be accountable not only for attainment and achievement of their students but also for the ways in which they teach ... the

central message internationally is ... that business as usual for schools and teachers is no longer an adequate response to the rapidly changing landscape.

The major concern of stakeholders in education is therefore on how to equip and update the promising teachers in the discharge of their duties and in particular enhancing successful learning outcome. Teaching as the most basic of all social phenomenon is as dynamic as the environment itself. It is therefore imperative for teachers to develop on the job and keep abreast with the continual changes in the environment in terms of scientific, technological and socio-economic advancement. Practicing teachers are the ones charged with the responsibilities of implementing educational innovations and bringing about desired change. Hence the need to put in place strategies for enhancing on-going professional development and support for teachers in our educational system. The National Policy on Education (NPE 2004) affirmed this resolve thus

"No matter the efficiency of pre-service training we give to teachers, there will necessarily be areas of inadequacies. Teacher Education will continue to take cognizance of changes in methodology and the curriculum. Teachers will be regularly exposed to innovations in their professions. In-service training will be developed as an integral part of continue teacher Education".

Education is a life long process of adjustments and readjustments of changing fashions and realities. Adequate provisions must be made for every educational Policy for continuing education outside the formal school.

The Concept and Purpose of Staff Development

In education, it has been recognized that the professional development of the teacher does not cease as he/she leaves the College as the academic programmes in the preparation of teachers rarely adequately address the actual realities in the classroom. Infact pre-service teacher education is just the first step in a career – long programme of professional development. An effective teacher is one who learns from teaching rather than the one who has finished learning how to teach, for he should be able to integrate relevant developmental changes within and into his lessons. Staff development according to Odor (1995) is the process of training and retraining of staff members in an organization for the purpose of acquiring more academic or professional qualifications, knowledge, skills and competences for increased efficiency in their primary functions for professional growth. Egwuyega (2000) defined staff development as an opportunity given to teachers to improve their performance, which eventually affect the quality of students they produce. Staff development is therefore an all embracing professional development bridge-stone which properly stands to supplement the inadequacies of the pre-service training or education of teachers. It is an opportunity of a continuous on the job professional support thereby enhancing the quality of output in the teaching and learning process. In developing countries like Nigeria, teacher in-service professional support is frequently scanty or non-existent because budgets are usually heavily front loaded in favour of pre-service programmes. If provided at all, in-service teacher education has relied on occasional large-scale centralized workshops with the following features;

- i. They reach only a small percentage of teachers.
- ii. They rely on those who attend the workshops to pass the information on to their colleagues through the multiplier mechanism.
- iii. Workshops or courses are "expert-driven" in that a desk-bound specialist typically transmits abstract information to teachers
- iv. Workshop provide negative models of passive learning
- v. They tend to be ad-hoc in content and rarely provide a comprehensive learning programme for teachers
- vi. They lead to little change in teachers' classroom approaches, in part because they depend on exhortation rather than modeling, process and structural practice in which teachers play an active role (Boyle et al 2003). The centralized in-service programme which rely on multiplier approach mechanism is particularly ineffective under the present professional outlook of a totally new way of teaching and learning where emphasis is on active learning, student focused, critical thinking and problem solving approach. In response to these pervading reforms and challenges in education, many countries are turning to more decentralized, localized and cost effective forms of teacher support. These in-service programmes follow a wide variety of patterns that include groups of teachers working together to improve their practice at a single school, teachers working together in cluster of several schools in a locality or a combination of the two.

The Concept and Purpose of Cluster In-service Teacher Professional Support

Most teachers do not demonstrate the full range of teaching skills and strategies, not because they do not want but because they have limited images of good teaching, as most of the practicing teachers had received no other in-service training after certification. Cluster in-service teacher professional support stands in to remedy these deficiencies. Cluster in-service teachers professional support programme is a staff development strategy geared towards helping each teacher facilitate change in the classroom through co-operative and collaborative approach. The cluster in-service teachers professional support programme is a school based initiative which brings teachers from the same school or various locations within a locality together in clusters and facilitate a co-operative process whereby participants become creative in problem solving, production of teaching and learning materials, preparation of lesson plan and generate ideas on teachers professionalism and suggest ways of improvement. It is an interactive approach in which all participants mutually benefit. Experienced and exceptional teachers are used as resource persons to assist and expose newly certified and old serving teachers who do not have the opportunity of attending any refresher courses to varieties of innovations in education which will make it possible for the cluster to work together and grow professionally in areas of common concern. The resource teachers on the other hand benefit because the questions from the cluster may provide an opportunity for them to re-examine their own classroom practices and the effects of accepted instructional techniques on the teaching/learning process and classroom management. Cluster in-service teacher professional support programme is a staff development initiative which provides a bridge stone with other teachers and school administrators to help solve problems and support each other through discussions, modeling, coaching and involvement with other aspects of school and educational changes. It is a capacity enhancement and professional development approach of a continuous on the job collaborative support and guidance for the purpose of updating and acquiring new knowledge, skills and competence for increased efficiency in their primary functions which will eventually rub on the quality of students' output.

Characteristics and Activities of Cluster Teacher In-service Support programmes

Cluster in-service teacher professional development programmes have become widespread and popular in recent years in both industrialized and developing nations. This new attraction stems from the inability of the centralized inservice programme, which relies on the multiplier mechanism because of its shortcomings to meet with the pervading reforms and present challenges in our educational system. In response, many countries are turning to a more decentralized, localized, cost-effective and more interactive teacher support programme which tend to bring teachers in a school or group of school within a locality or a combination of the two to facilitate a co-operative and collaborative approach to teaching and learning as the primary means of professional support for teachers (Chesterfield and Rubio 1997) Craig etc 1998, Engel 2001). The main thrust of the cluster in-service teacher professional support programme is the cluster Teachers' meeting which is the act of bringing teachers within a school, from different schools in various locations within a locality together to meet, develop and generate ideas on teachers professionalism and suggest ways of improvement. The need for a cluster meeting may be initiated by the resource persons or any group of stakeholders e.g. UBE Zonal, SPEB, LGEA, PTA, NUT, Teachers, school administrators etc. The stakeholders meet to identify the needs of the schools, teachers, school administrators in a locality, and organize a need-based workshop where a planned programme of amelioration is produced. Such need may arise from the following: -

- i. Widespread curriculum reforms that emphasize active learning and the accompanying necessity of rapid and effective teacher change.
- ii. Growing realization of the central role of teacher quality in improving overall educational quality.
- iii. Career – long on going teacher professional development now viewed as a necessity in order to improve teacher quality and therefore educational quality.
- iv. Rapid expansion of students enrolment requiring much larger number of teachers and the necessity of finding ways to support relatively inexperienced or unqualified teachers.
- v. Declining quality as a consequence of rapidly expanding quantity of education in the absence of sufficient resources and
- vi. Willingness on the part of Government and voluntary agencies to invest in teacher quality. Facilitation of and involvement in these programmes are usually highly participatory and carried out by the teachers themselves and outside advisors using support materials or modules that give basic information on innovative practices and provide suggestions for the sessions. The curricular and content of these in-service programmes vary from

- ❖ adhoc and loosely organized to
- ❖ partially or wholly structured around teachers' expressed needs to
- ❖ highly structured programmes that are closely related to the

Curriculum of pre-service teacher Education. The approach to teacher learning embedded in this methodology follows participatory, students – centred, active – learning approaches that teachers are learning and implementing in their classrooms. Programmes are supported by a variety of teacher – learning materials including printed materials, radio support or multimedia kits. Sharing of experiences and communal problem solving are central to the programme. Frequency of meetings vary widely from a few times during a school year to perhaps as often as once every few weeks or once a month. Geography is of particular concern in determining how frequently cluster in-service events can take place, especially since teachers in widely dispersed schools in very remote areas probably cannot meet as frequently as those in more densely populated areas. Such factors as organisation and leadership, supply of support materials, degree of system support, teachers incentive, making teachers participation mandatory, play strong roles in determining how vigorous and effective the programmes are. Each cluster meeting starts with a round table sharing of experiences by participants. The cluster leader or resource person in a session invites teachers to share their classroom experiences in putting new ideas into practice: what new strategies or approaches have they tried? What worked, what didn't work and why? Through these exchanges participants celebrate their successes and engage in joint problem solving. To ensure continuity and sustainability a hosting roster is drawn and each participating school takes turn to host by providing a conducive meeting venue and entertainment. Report of each session should be documented since it is one of the major medium through which support programme activities are evaluated.

Educational Implications of Cluster In-service Teacher Professional Support Programmes

1. The shift towards cluster in-service programme is fundamentally related to the changing pattern of teachers' in-service education in the context of the need for improved teacher quality, rapid educational expansion and changing educational goal.
2. Cluster in-service programmes are very popular with teachers who are accustomed to receiving little or no professional attention and working in isolation. Teachers react positively to the opportunity to learn and to the regard for their professional worth that such programmes signal.
3. Cluster in-service programmes provide a much appreciated mechanism for professional dialogue and collaborative problem solving, particularly in isolated rural areas.
4. Induction of new teachers. One of the most recognized uses of cluster in-service programme is the conveyance of operating procedures to new teachers. A school, which enthusiastically welcome new teachers and initiates them into active participation in the educational process reduces its teacher attrition rate (Driscoll et al 1985).
5. The new or beginning teacher is expected to work in a hierarchically structured school system where there are administratively laid down rules and regulations. The cluster in-service programme teaches the skills necessary to comply and cope with them. The cluster provides the new or inexperienced teachers with opportunity to develop professional competence through co-operative and collaborative guidance and support.
6. Cluster as a learning community of teachers. Teachers have the best ideas for content and for organizing and administering school based in-service programme. They know what is most relevant to their practice and as professionalism grows, they will have the greatest concern for quality.

CONCLUSION

There is the growing consensus that professional development yields the best results when it is long-term, school based and collaborative, actively involving all teachers, focused on students learning and linked to the curriculum (Hiebert et al 2002). In order to achieve on-going professional development that reaches all teachers, programmes must be more localized, must also be facilitated locally and use as a matter of central importance teachers own knowledge of their practice and the realities of their classrooms and schools. This is the main thrust of cluster in-service professional support programme.

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