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TEACHER CAPACITY BUILDING AND THE FUTURE OF CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION	166
Abstract	166
Introduction	166
Curriculum implementation	167
Educational Administration	167
Benefits of Capacity building to Curriculum Implementation	168
Improvement of the state of Capacity building Curriculum implementation in Nigeria	169
The need for capacity building	170
Practical Steps in Capacity Building	170
Ways capacity building can facilitate curriculum implementation	170
Capacity building for curriculum implementation has three essential dimensions	171
Recommendations	171
Conclusion	172
References	172
<i>Skills Acquisition As a Tool For Self-Reliance: Implications For Counselling.</i>	175

SKILLS ACQUISITION AS A TOOL FOR SELF-RELIANCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING

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Abstract

This paper focuses on skills acquisition as a tool for self-reliance in a distressed economy like ours. With the increasing unemployment rate and under-employment among the youths, the relevance of skills acquisition cannot be overemphasized as they can transform the youths from job seekers to job creators. The paper adopted the review research method because it is an opinion paper. The paper noted that before the advent of Western education in Nigeria, skills acquisition was more or less hereditary as children of blacksmiths,

carpenters, herbalists, etc., took after their parents. In addition, the paper reported that about 64 million out of the total population of 80 million youths (i.e. about 80%) are unemployed, while 1.6 million are under-employed. Some government efforts in skills acquisition include the establishment of Technical Colleges and Polytechnics. In addition, the introduction of 35 entrepreneurship subjects in the secondary school syllabus encourages skills acquisition among youths. The paper concludes that the roles of Guidance Counsellors in the career choice and skills acquisition of pupils, students and youths based on their interests, aptitudes and capabilities cannot be over-emphasized.

Keywords: skills, acquisition, self-reliance, counselling.

Introduction

One of the significant aims of education in the traditional Nigerian society is job orientation; hence, the emphasis was on agricultural education in crops and animal production. With the advent of Western education, most youths became alienated from traditional education. In 1953, a memorandum on African communities' education recommended that education be adapted to the various peoples' mentality, attitudes, occupations and traditions (Fafunwa, 1986). Towards this end, the objectives of primary education in Nigeria include:

- Giving the child opportunities to develop manipulative skills will enable him to function effectively in society within the limits of his capacity.
- Providing essential tools for further educational advancement, including preparation for trades and crafts of the locality.

Similarly, the broad aims of secondary education within our overall national objectives should be:

- a. Preparation for beneficial living within the society; and
- b. Preparation for higher education.

In specific terms, the secondary school should:

- Diversify its curriculum to cater for the differences in talents, opportunities and roles possessed by or open to students after their secondary school course.
- Inspire its students with a desire for achievement and self-improvement at school and later in life (National Policy on Education, 2014, pages 12 and 16, respectively).

To achieve the above-stated objectives, governments plan that primary and secondary education should be six years each, respectively, while University education should be four years. The six years of secondary education are divided into three years of junior secondary school and another three years of senior secondary school. This 3-3 years secondary education was supposed to commence with the first graduands in the 1982/83 academic session. Introductory Technology (Intro. Tech) as a subject became compulsory for students to acquire skills before leaving school, and the government imported various equipment which were distributed to the schools. The skills acquisition programme was further consolidated by introducing 35 entrepreneurship subjects by the Federal Ministry of Education into the school curriculum. These subjects range from painting, electrical work, carpentry, upholstery, catering, garment making, data processing, bookkeeping, barbing, hairdressing, tie and dye to fish farming and auto-mechanics, among others (Needs 2005, Orona, 2005). It is believed that the acquisition of skills will create self-employment and inculcate "respect for the dignity of labour" as opposed to the dignity of "white collar jobs."

Conceptual Framework

Ofuonyebuzor (2009) noted that before the advent of Western education, skills acquisition was more or less hereditary as the children of a carpenter, bricklayers, herbalists, blacksmiths, etc., took after their father's occupation(s)—every average individual desires to live a happy and comfortable life. Ironically, many do not seem to understand how to attain sustainable living. This is because many people rely so much on the government to provide them employment, whereas the means to acquire the much-desired standard living lies at their doorsteps.

Skills acquisition or entrepreneurship is an individual's holistic process or efforts to acquire a skill(s) to live a self-reliant, self-satisfied, independent and fulfilled life without looking for a non-available government job(s). They need to be exposed to entrepreneurship, which would open several opportunities that will enable them to become employers and not employees (Akingbulu et al., 2015). In other words, skills acquisition transforms an individual from a job seeker to a job creator.

In this paper, the terms skill acquisition, entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship skills shall be used interchangeably to mean the same thing to avoid ambiguity in meanings. Before the oil boom era of the 1970s, Nigerians believed in what one could do to ensure self-sustenance, self-dependency, self-actualization, self-reliance, and self-fulfilment. This is why the Nigerian economy grew and depended on diversified agricultural products such as cocoa, groundnut, palm oil/kernel, cassava and rubber. Then, the economy encouraged and witnessed an increase of many skilled technicians, carpenters, painters, auto-mechanics and tailors, to mention just a few (Isike, 2008). With the oil boom, the emphasis shifted from acquiring entrepreneurial skills to

paper qualification(s), where both the government and individuals abandoned skills acquisition and utilization that can boost the country's economy (Grema et al., 2015).

In the opinion of Obiazi (2009), Skills acquisition consolidates and builds upon primary education to empower the youths to live and function as productive members of society, earning a living and contributing to societal progress. Entrepreneurship skills, therefore, are business skills that one acquires to function effectively in the turbulent business environment as an independent or self-employed person to improve one's economic status and society at large. The importance of entrepreneurship skills cannot be overemphasized as it will help make young school leavers self-reliant and boost their economic status. Isike (2008) stated that entrepreneurship has been identified globally and nationally as a tool for generating a sustainable economy, which is the core value of the National Economic Empowerment Development Strategies (NEEDS). The bottom line here is that establishing small businesses helps generate a substantial amount of employment and income, which are essential parts of a country's Gross National Product (GNP). The skills must be learned in formal and non-formal settings to ensure the benefits of skills acquisition for the youths and the general public. It must be emphasized here that skills acquisition does not entirely depend upon a person's fundamental, innate capacities but must be developed through training, practice and experience an individual acquired (Olanyonu et al., 2003).

Pleshette (2009) identified the four main stages of skills acquisition and development to include:

- i. Analyze and identify the current and foreseeable skill needs for business in terms of management, administrative and technical skills and the relative importance of these.
- ii. Identify the entrepreneurs' personal goals and objectives and analyze and evaluate their skills and resources related to these.
- iii. Produce a realistic personal development plan for the potential entrepreneur.
- iv. Monitor ongoing performance on follow-up of the entrepreneur once the business has started and progress made towards developing the new skills previously identified as necessary for the business's success.

According to the Federal Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2012), 64 million out of the population of 80 million youths, representing 80%, are unemployed, while 1.6 million are under-employed. The poverty level is also high, as Nigeria ranked 148th out of 173 countries on Human Development Index (HDI). Over 70% of people live below the income poverty line of less than one US dollar per day (IFPRI, 2009). In addition, in the 2013 Global Hunger Index (GHI), Nigeria scored 15.0, classifying Nigeria as a nation with a severe hunger issue. Similarly, most of those involved in kidnapping, armed robbery, yahoo, ritual killings, child trafficking and other forms of crime are unemployed youths. With this gloomy picture painted, the urgent need for skills acquisition/ entrepreneurship among youths in this country to enable them to be self-reliant cannot be over-emphasized.

Government efforts in skills acquisition

Towards the fulfilment of the objectives of both primary and secondary education in Nigeria, as stated in the introductory part of this paper, governments at different times have encouraged the development of skills acquisition in various forms:

a. For the school leavers and youths:

- They introduced the National Directorate of Employment (NDE).
- They introduced the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS).
- They introduced the State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (SEEDS).

b. For students in school:

1. Government established technical colleges and polytechnics.
2. They also introduced other technological courses in Colleges of Education and Universities, such as entrepreneurship studies.
3. They restructured the school system to what is now known as the 6-3-3-4.
4. They introduced introductory technology as a compulsory subject in all secondary schools.
5. They imported and distributed various equipment to secondary schools from 1982-1985
6. They have now consolidated the skills acquisition programme by introducing 35 entrepreneurship subjects. These subjects include spray painting, electrical and mechanical works, carpentry, catering, marketing, panel beating, data processing, garment making, bookkeeping, tie and dye, phone/computer repairs, barbing, and hairdressing.

All these efforts by the government were to empower youths to acquire at least one skill on graduation. The Federal Ministry of Labour, Employment and Productivity initiated the first group of programmes, while the Federal coordinated the second group and state ministries of Education. However, the question of how successful or effective these programmes were is a topic for discussion in future (Orona, 2005; Ofuonyebuzor, 2009).

Skills Acquisition as a Tool for Self-Reliance

Ofuonyebuzor (2009) identify the advantages of skills acquisition to the individual and the nation.

- It turns one from a job seeker to a job creator.
- It enhances self-satisfaction/fulfilment as one uses the proceeds of his skills to build a house, buy a car/motorcycle, feed and train his children.

- It leads to job satisfaction and, by so doing, reduces the rate of corruption, stealing, kidnapping, etc.
- It leads to self-sustenance and livelihood as the workers are paid for their services.
- It reduces the rate of unemployment since everyone has something to do.
- It encourages specialization in skills (from carpenters to furniture makers and interior decorators)
- It reduces the price of services since there are many people to choose from to do the work.
- It enhances peace and progress in the community, state and nation as everyone can contribute his quota through the proceeds of the skill(s) acquired.

Olaniyi (2015) stated that the benefits of skills acquisition/entrepreneurship to both individuals and society include:

1. Reduction of poverty: It is a way of salvaging the nation from poverty.
2. Reduction of idleness: The youths will be gainfully engaged and use their time judiciously on profitable ventures.
3. It leads to the nation's economic development in which foreign investors can be attracted, thereby enhancing the much-needed industrialization.
4. It promotes peace and harmony as unemployment, poverty, and idleness have been reduced to the barest minimum.
5. It reduces hunger and malnutrition as youths are encouraged to go into mechanized agriculture to combat food shortages.
6. It promotes self-fulfilment/reliance due to a reduction in the level of dependency by the youths.

Challenges to practical skills acquisition.

Olawole (2014) stated that the skills acquisition programme for students and youths both within and outside the school today is a mere theoretical framework due to several challenges, which include:

1. Corruption as the government supplied nonfunctional equipment to schools
2. Lack of electricity in schools to power installed equipment
3. Lack of workshops to install the supplied equipment
4. Lack of trained personnel to install and use the equipment
5. Theft/vandalization of equipment by hoodlums

6. Inadequate funding by the government for workshops, installations and replacement of broken-down equipment.
7. Lack of supervision/monitoring by government agencies
8. High cost of training (apprenticeship)
9. There is a lack of take-off loans for those who have acquired skills, and where available, a high-interest rate is required.
10. Difficulty in obtaining land for cultivation
11. High cost of farm implements, fertilizers, labour and seedlings.
12. Many schools offer computer and other technological subjects, but how many students have the practical knowledge of the subject(s)?

Implications for Counselling

Counselling is a profession that assists individuals to understand themselves better in terms of their interests, capabilities, weaknesses and aspirations to function effectively in the society in which they live. Empowering youths with entrepreneurial skills through proper counselling will be a positive way of empowering Nigerians who are now passing through horrible unemployment and economic challenges. In this regard, counsellors need to conduct regular enlightenment programmes both within and outside the school for students, parents and the general public on the benefits of entrepreneurship/skills acquisition. Providing relevant and adequate information is one of the essential functions of the counsellor in the training/programme for skills acquisition for the youths who are regarded as the hope and engine room of tomorrow. Youths will not only be self-reliant but equally contribute their quota to the growth of the nation's economy when they are properly guided and assisted in discovering their interests and capabilities regarding skills acquisition.

Recommendations

Joblessness has resulted in the rising incidence of social ills among youths. Therefore, the Government should formulate policies that will improve youths' empowerment and development to reverse the negative consequences.

1. Expand opportunities for vocational training and entrepreneurial development.
2. The government should re-equip schools with functional Introductory Technology equipment for training students while in school.
3. To check rural-urban drift, promote integrated rural development (good roads, electricity, health facilities, etc.).
4. All channels of communication/information should be used to create awareness of the benefits of skills acquisition to the youths in a depressed economy.

5. Students' industrial work Experiences (SIWES) should be appropriately re-organised, supervised and made more effective, not just mere formality as a requirement for graduation.
6. Inculcate in Nigerian youths the virtues of handwork, patience, patriotism, honesty, discipline and integrity.
7. Promote access to microfinance and other poverty alleviation strategies to reduce poverty among youths, e.g. National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), National Directorate of Employment (NDE) and State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (SEEDS), among others.
8. Make Guidance and Counselling more functional/effective in schools for proper guidance of students in their choice(s) of career/skills.

Conclusion

Without a doubt, Nigeria is facing a daily increase in the number of youths unemployed and underemployed, resulting in a rising incidence of social ills among the youths. Moreover, it is necessary to present the picture of the skills acquisition programme as it is before we can decide whether the system should continue unchanged or a major restructuring is required. In a distressed economy like ours, the relevance of skills acquisition as a tool for self-reliance cannot be over-emphasized. For a country's educational system to fulfil one of its primary objectives (i.e. preparing the individual for a useful life), emphasis must be laid on vocational guidance, which requires the active involvement of Guidance Counsellors for practical guidance of pupils, students and youths in their choice(s) of career and skills acquisition based on their interest, aptitudes and capabilities.

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