

Professionalising Teaching in Nigeria: The Competency Paradigm

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Abstract

The teaching profession is going through trying times in Nigeria and its nobility is waning. Many people come into the profession out of frustration. However, professional competence vis-à-vis the provision of a common language of skills and knowledge across the various sectors of teaching and the preservation of the existing gains in standards and alignments form the focus of this paper. The purpose of the study therefore is to elucidate the level of competency and proffer solutions where there are shortcomings. The study is significant in the sense that it would sharpen the character and competence of contemporary teachers in Nigeria. It will boost the way teachers are able to respond to what happens in and out of the class, determines the degree to which he is appreciated and valued because that is the point where the line of success in teaching and learning is drawn and competence evolves. People who are sound in learning and character need to be encouraged and accorded the opportunity to train as teachers through generous bursary and scholarship awards. The Teachers' Registration Council (TRC), it is hoped, will provide a stage for the actualization of a world class training of professionally competent teachers. These new crop of teachers will be equipped and empowered to maximize the gains of western education for learners who are uniquely groomed in acceptable, moral and ethical values that will place Nigeria on the contemporary world map.

Keywords: teaching, professionalism, competence, culture, values

INTRODUCTION

It is common place to hear or read such a statement like "the standard of education in Nigeria is falling." At other times, those who had their own education immediately after the Nigeria independence up to the early eighties try to say that, "they are the last of the best." Whether or not the standard of education has fallen is not the reason for this paper; however, it is not possible to talk about standards and quality of an educational system without talking about the quality of the teacher, his teaching and his competence.

Teacher's competence can be described as a shelter over his professionalism in doing the holy job of teaching, that has been proven from time to time as 'doctors to education' and hopefully as the "actors of changes" to human development all over the world. The belief in the need for teacher's competence is not misplaced as it provides the basis for an axiom "without teachers, we are useless". This axiom is a reminder of the fact that teachers are certain people who have certain ability to guide students so that they will have certain dexterities as needed wherever, whenever, and however they are and whatever they will do.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The teaching profession in Nigeria has passed through many noble phases from colonial times to date but unfortunately, its nobility is waning. Many people come into

the profession out of frustration. However, professional competence vis-à-vis the provision of a common language of skills and knowledge across the various sectors of teaching and the preservation of the existing gains in standards and alignments form the focus of this paper. It is on this basis that the study sought to look into the issue of professionalising teaching in Nigeria and the competency paradigm.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This paper will be of value in setting forth a statement on competence including the provision of a common language of skills and knowledge across the various teaching sectors and the preservation of existing gains in standards and alignments of the profession. Competency therefore would be understood as a term used extensively by different people in different contexts and defined in different ways. The teachers need re-orientation from the primary to tertiary levels to work as a team. That way, they can put all their cards on the table and all the stakeholders will have things done on their terms.

Teacher education and job performance: The process of teacher education and his performance on the job are the contexts in which this term is used. Competencies are central to the requirements of a 'competency based teacher education', which include knowledge, skills and values the trainee teacher must demonstrate for successful completion of the teacher education program.

A few characteristics of competency in teacher education are that:

- (1) it has one or more skills whose mastery would influence its attainment,
- (2) it has linkage with all the three domains under which performance can be assessed (i.e. knowledge, skill and attitude),
- (3) It is observable and demonstrable, and
- (4) since the competencies are observable, they are also measurable and assessable.

Teacher's competence therefore refers to "the right way of conveying units of knowledge, application and skills to students". The right way here includes knowledge of content, processes, methods and means of conveying content. In order to know if we possess the necessary competencies in a given situation, we have to be judged on the basis of our ability to produce certain effects. Surely, there are as many ways of being effective as there are effects. Even at that, there could be disagreement over the effects that a teacher is expected to produce. It calls for value judgments and decisions as to how we wish to view teaching.

The research studies conducted so far indicate that there is no single set of competencies which all the effective teachers possess or all the ineffective ones lack. In other words, the concept of teacher's competence is a highly situational one that involves value judgments which make one absolute set of competencies effective in relation to all kinds of learner groups. There are many different sets that are relevant.

There seem to be different ways of classifying teacher's competencies. The first is in terms of teacher's functions. Essentially, teachers have two major roles in the classroom:

- (i) creative conditions under which learning can take place i.e. the social side of teaching and
- (ii) impartation, by a variety of means, 'knowledge' to their learners - the task oriented side of teaching.

The first we could term as the 'enabling' or management function and the second, the instructional function. These complement each other as the latter would be, more or less impossible without the former. In practice, it is very difficult to separate the two and often, one performs both functions simultaneously as performance is of interest to teachers.

These can be summarised as having the following elements:

- (1) **class management:** The teacher's authority, and the ability to control and organise the classroom,

- (2) **Pedagogy:** The content and the methods of a lesson, involving selection, presentation, sequence and pace,
- (3) **Continuity and coherence:** The link between lessons to make up a course (i.e. links between subjects: links between year groups etc.),
- (4) **School structures and cultures:** The structure of the whole curriculum and how it is allocated between groups: staff cultures and styles of working, and
- (5) **The school in the context of the educational system:** The different types of school, and the interrelationships and relations with other aspects of the education system as a whole.

Pollard (2002) opined that competencies that have received most attention have related to subject matter knowledge and classroom management skills. In Nigeria where this concept is particularly orchestrated, no group within the profession is ready "to take the bull by the horn." As the buck passing continues in matters of professionalism in teaching, it almost always ends at the doorsteps of the higher institutions who work in partnership with education ministries, departments or agencies with regards to the training of teachers.

Researches all over the world on teaching and learning to teach fall into several distinct areas, each exploring different aspects of the process of professional development among teachers and it goes without saying therefore that an individual adjudged to be competent must have a purpose for coming into teaching and will have a clearly defined role to play in a regenerated school system.

Too often, there is a tendency to think of competence as ability to do something well or the power of an organisation or individual to deal with something well or better still, the skill needed in a particular job for a particular task. Competence transcends such straight'-jacketed definitions. It is holistic and by far more encompassing and laden with greater responsibilities. It is beyond issues of quality in terms of skills that can be pre-specified and continuously assessed. It is more than subject-matter related knowledge and classroom management skills. It is a creative, resourceful, pragmatic and dynamic blend of subject knowledge and life experiences for the maintenance and improvement of schools.

In the teaching profession, the thought of what makes a teacher competent can make one forget the real purpose for and the place of teacher's competence in education. In such a presumptuous state of ignorance or confusion or both, teachers get polarised between extremes of competence represented by subject

knowledge and application and personality dimension in teaching.

The National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS, 2004) document noted that, “the goals of wealth creation, employment generation, poverty reduction and value reorientation can be effectively pursued, attained and sustained only through an efficient, relevant and functional education system”.

In general terms, a competent teacher should have good education which is inseparable in practice from competence because:

- (a) the concept of his competence must be reflected in the general purposes, goals and philosophy of education.
- (b) such concept also must take cognisance of the social and psychological factors impinging on the subsisting generation and
- (c) the concept would need to re-examine the societal basic assumptions and old beliefs in terms of current and future trends

Implications for the Educational System

If the essence of education is to produce worthy individuals in a society, then the full development of the potentialities of each citizen for his own good and that of the state is sacrosanct because it is a product of a positive change in the attitude, skills, motivation and management of their trainers (teachers) for the corporate welfare of the state. The learner requires help to build the spirit of inquiry through observing, finding out, asking questions and doing something about the innumerable problems our social and environmental factors pose every day. Therefore, a teacher who will perform these feats must consciously aim at the type of education that will produce children and adults who can think effectively and act independently on the basis of conviction and principles. An appropriate climate thus provided to position the schools as providers of knowledge and skills that lay the foundations capable of galvanising the up and coming Nigerians to a level where they are productive, creative and socially agreeable members of the society will affirm or rubbish the competence of the teachers on ground.

Teacher training therefore, is synonymous with teacher’s development into professionals; a complex process which involves influential factors with far-reaching implications. These factors include socialization, motivation, acceptance, autonomy, control and fair play.

Socialisation into the Teaching Profession

Very few contemporary teachers set out to be practicing teachers for so many reasons. As at present, many academics don’t share the view that teaching is a profession. To them, it can pass for “a

Para-profession”. They believe that anybody can be a teacher. They say, “Teachers are born not made”. These, in the opinion of Zeichner and Gore (1990) are influenced by traditions and practices that are taken for granted. Commissioners and Ministers of Education are appointed without recourse to whether or not they understand the dynamics of the educational system in Nigeria. This gross oversight accounts for why educational policies are altered for sectional or personal reasons. These occurrences are morale-killers for those in the profession and those who aspire to come into it.

A teacher who is worth his salt knows that, the main aim of his job is to make students learn effectively and efficiently. For doing so, a teacher has to do several activities such as planning properly, providing effective instruction and evaluating the learning activities using appropriate methods and techniques. In consequence, a teacher has to perform a host of activities inside and outside the classroom which will justify his effectiveness or ineffectiveness in teaching which is closely linked to competence. It is only a competent teacher that creates classroom conditions and climate, which are conducive for student learning.

Richards (2006: 5) in talking about “The Roles of Teachers and Learners”, argues that learners now had to participate in classroom activities that were based on a cooperative rather than individualistic approach to learning. Students are far more comfortable with listening to their peers in group work or pair work tasks, rather than relying on the teacher for a model. Teachers now assume the role of facilitators and monitors rather than being models for replicating students after their personality.

Brown (2001: 200-202), in talking about teacher’s roles and styles, acknowledges that a teacher has to play many roles and in doing so, he would think of the possibilities of his roles as: authority figure, leader, knower, director, manager, counsellor, guide, and even such roles as friend, confidante, and parent. This will depend on the subsisting policies in a country and or institution in which he is teaching. In reality, some of these roles will be more prominent than others, especially in the presence of his students. A teacher who is a sympathetic friend to some students and a dispassionate authority figure to others can create a dangerous unsettling situation about himself. Any attempt by him to play out his roles in this manner can set students against each other, with many unsavoury feeling arising from an inner circle of those who see themselves as “cut out from the privileged or teacher’s pets”.

In the opinion of Harmer (2007), good teachers can look back at their own schooldays and identify teachers they thought were good and surprisingly so,

they find it even harder to say why certain teachers struck them as special. Perhaps it was because of their personality or they had interesting things to say. Maybe the reason was that they looked as if they loved their job, or perhaps their interest in their students' progress was compelling. All these come together as veritable assessors of the teacher's competence and the complex environment under which he operates. This scenario makes it difficult to give general descriptions of good teachers because different teachers are often successful in different ways. Some teachers are more extrovert or introvert than others because they have different strengths and weaknesses. A lot will depend, too, on how students view individual teachers because not all students will share the same opinions. The saying that, 'good teachers are born, not made' does seem that some people have a natural affinity for the job and there are also others, who do not have what appears to be a natural gift but who are still effective and popular teachers. Such teachers learn their craft through a mixture of personality, intelligence, knowledge and experience (and how they reflect on it). Teachers who are apparently 'born teachers' weren't like that at the beginning at all, but grew into the role as they learnt their craft. In all honesty, teaching is not an easy job, but it is a necessary one that can be very rewarding when students make progress and know that they were encouraged or motivated to make it happen. It is true that some lessons and students can be difficult and stressful at times, but it is also worth remembering that at its best, teaching can also be extremely enjoyable.

Malik et al (2003: 521-522) in their study about the Competency of University Teachers at the University of Agriculture, Faisalabad, came up with the view regarding the competence exhibited by the teachers and suggestions for its enhancement that, students were well aware of the component and content of knowledge needed and those possessed by their teachers. They suggested that teachers must not only possess latest knowledge, but must also be sympathetic, regular, punctual, friendly, and free from any prejudice. According to Kakkar in Malik (2003), the teacher of today is not a mere purveyor of lessons in a classroom. He is instead an individual who is of course not only interested in children acquisition of knowledge and skills but is equally involved in his total development.

Padwad and Dixit (2008) in their paper entitled *Impact of Professional Learning Community Participation on Teachers' Thinking about Classroom Problems* believe that teacher education seems to exhibit a shift from product-oriented mode to social constructivist, process-oriented mode of working. This is why the classrooms, the sites of educational business, are often metaphorically equated to "battlefields", where "teacher-soldiers"

have to "wage a war" of education against all odds. Classrooms are sites riddled with innumerable problems, and teachers are those who have to face them immediately and directly. The success of the war depends on how effectively these problems are dealt with. This requires, on the one hand, minimising the occurrence of problems and on the other, equipping teachers to confront them effectively. Teacher education is usually concerned with the latter, and seeks a clear focus on continuous professional development. One popular and prevalent way of addressing this has been, organizing training programs, short courses, and academic sessions that are normally "peaceful and eventful."

Training a teacher entails the selection of potentially suitable individuals (and by implication, the elimination of unsuitable applicants); the continuing personal education of the trainee so that he can be seen to be a member of the educated sector of the community; general training as a teacher irrespective of specialization; and special training as language teachers (language is used in its broad sense here). This is why the current situation whereby pre-service or undergraduate teachers in training come into teaching because they are tired of staying at home or taking admission and matriculation examinations year in year out is unacceptable.

The competent teacher in the opinion of Brown (2001: 166-168) can play many roles in the course of teaching. Just as parents are called upon to be many things to their children, teachers cannot be satisfied with only one role. Quoting Rebecca Oxford et al. (1988), teacher's roles are often best described in the form of metaphor: teachers as manufacturers, teachers as doctors, teachers as judges, teachers as gardeners, and others. According to Brown therefore, we will find another set of metaphors to describe a spectrum of possibilities of teachers' roles, some of which are more conducive to creating an interactive classroom than others.

The metaphors related to the teacher's job described teachers as controllers, a role that is sometimes expected in traditional educational institutions as that of a "master controller". One who is always in charge of every moment in the classroom? Master controllers determine what the students do, when they should speak, and what language forms they should use. They can often predict many student responses because everything is mapped out ahead of time, with no leeway for divergent paths. In some respects, such control may sound admirable. But for interaction to take place, the teacher must create a climate in which spontaneity can thrive, in which unrehearsed language can be performed, and in which the freedom of expression given to the students makes it impossible to predict everything that they will say and do.

Nevertheless, some creative control on the part of a practicing teacher is actually an important element of successfully carried out interactive techniques in the contemporary classroom. In the planning phase, a wise controller will carefully project how a technique will proceed, map out the initial input to students, specify directions to be given, and gauge the timing of a technique. Granted that allowing for spontaneity of expression involves yielding certain elements of control to students, the teacher in this millennium needs to work things out so as to derive joy and pleasure that will be infectious to his learners because even in the most cooperative of interactive classrooms, the teacher must maintain some control simply to ensure that his class is organised, orderly and prudently managed.

Secondly, the teacher as director can ensure that interactive classroom time is legitimately structured in such a way that the teacher acts like a conductor of an orchestra or a director of a drama. As the students engage in their rehearsed or spontaneous performance, it is his job to keep the process flowing smoothly and efficiently. The ultimate motive of such direction, of course, must always be to enable students engage in the real-life drama of improvisation so as to bring out the uniqueness of such classroom interaction.

Thirdly, teacher as a manager captures the role of one who plans lessons, modules, and courses, and structures the largest, longer segments of classroom time, but who then allows each individual player to be creative within those parameters. Managers of successful corporations, for example, retain control of certain larger objectives of the company, keep employees pointed toward goals, engage in ongoing evaluation and feedback, but give freedom to each person to work in his or her own individual areas of expertise.

Fourthly, teacher as facilitator can be described as causing the process of learning to take place, making learning easier for students: helping them to clear away roadblocks, finding shortcuts to negotiating rough terrain. The facilitating role requires that he steps away from the managerial or directive role and allow students, with guidance and gentle prodding, to find their own pathway to success. A facilitator therefore capitalises on the principle of intrinsic motivation by allowing students to discover concepts pragmatically, rather than by telling them about it.

Finally, teacher as resource, positions him to play a less directive role. In fact, the implication of the resource role is that the student takes the initiative to come to the teacher. He is available for advice and counsel when the student seeks it. It is of course not practical to push this metaphor to an extreme where he as a teacher simply walks into a classroom and say

something like, "Well, what do you want to learn today?" Some degree of control, of planning, of managing the classroom is essential. But there are appropriate times when he can literally take a back seat and allow the students to proceed with their own development.

Harmer (2007: 23-24) warns that when a teacher walks into his class, students get an idea of who they are as a result of what they look like (how they dress and present themselves) and the way they behave and react to what is going on. Students take note, either consciously or subconsciously, of whether teachers are always the same or they can be flexible, depending on what is happening at a particular point in the lesson.

Teachers, like any other group of human beings, have individual differences because one of the things, perhaps, that differentiate them from some other professions, is that they become different people, when they are in front of a class from the people they are in other situations, such as at home or at a party. Everyone switches roles like this in their daily lives to some extent, but for teachers, who they are (or appear to be) when they are at work is especially important." Who teachers are in the class depends on their personality, adaptability, and roles.

The teacher's physical presence can play a large part in his management of the classroom environment. It's not just appearance (though that is clearly an issue for the secondary student just forming his personality and character) but also the way he moves and stands and the degree to which he is physically demonstrative can have a clear effect on the management of the class. Most importantly, the way teachers are able to respond to what happens in the class, the degree to which he is aware of what is going on, often marks the difference between successful teaching and less satisfactory lessons. All teachers, like all people, have their own physical characteristics and habits, and they take these into the classroom with them.

CONCLUSION

The era of pre-service or undergraduate teachers in training coming into teaching because they are tired of staying at home or taking admission and matriculation examinations must stop. Those found suitable should be accorded an enviable status quo for teacher training. This can be done by giving generous bursary and scholarship awards, workable and harmonised induction and issuance of license for the practice of teaching as a profession. The nation's hope on the Teachers' Registration Council (TRC) must be jealously guarded and protected from "teacher politicians, ethnocentric educational planners and opportunists" in order to take

teaching/learning and its multifarious outputs to the next level in Nigeria.

The proprietors of schools in accord with the teachers must collaborate to help the learners inculcate well-blended moral and ethical values that will ensure the survival of our society Nigeria. There is no gainsaying the fact that our learners, young and old are presently caught up between two un-mastered cultures laden with conflicting values and demands. The learning environment being created or imagined is neither a replica of the western world nor a pragmatic modification of our indigenous education system. They are like bats- neither birds nor rats! The attainment of all these is a long way off but by no means unattainable.

LIMITATIONS

Teachers constitute the largest work force in the civil service yet governments (Local, State and Federal) in Nigeria are not committed to their training and re-training. Ironically, teachers as professionals, are disunited and this makes them vulnerable to abuse and derision. Those who benefit from this anomaly continue to cause a cog in the wheel of professionalism for teachers. The buck passing continues but it is clear that for any research to succeed in this area there is need for enduring time for funding sensitization and possible rebranding.

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