

MANAGING STUDENTS' DIVERSITY FOR THE DELIVERING OF QUALITY LEARNING OUTCOMES IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examines the managing of students' diversity for the delivering of quality learning outcomes in secondary schools in Nigeria. The paper was theoretical in nature and as such adopted qualitative method of analysis where data were collected from secondary sources such as textbooks, journals and the internet. The study identifies different approaches in managing students' diversity in secondary schools. Among the approaches listed are school policy, staff development and teacher/student relations. The paper explains that there are no two students that are alike in all things and due to their diverse nature, they respond to teaching differently. Also, it went further to explain that improper managing of students' diversity can be a reason for poor academic performance of the students and so only total quality diversity management can erase this challenge in the process of teaching and learning. To actually fulfill the purpose of delivering quality outcome, the paper recommends amongst others; that all those charged with students' responsibilities should be enlightened via conferences on how to handle diversity matters and that a standing school policy on diversity should be enacted and enforced.

Keywords: *Managing, Students' diversity, Learning, Quality outcomes, Secondary schools*

Introduction

Schools all over the world are made up of students with diverse characteristics. The nature of students' diversity is complex considering the diverse cultures and languages that exist. This complex nature can hinder the attainment of school goals / objectives when not managed with the right strategies. There is a wide diversity of cultural backgrounds in today's classrooms and every indication is that this diversity will continue to increase and as such will generate problems for the school system. The demographic dynamics in our society illustrates the need for the teachers and the school heads to have a good understanding and knowledge of the growing rate of diversity in the classrooms. Teaching in a classroom where students' diversity is highly pronounced can be very challenging as these students respond to teaching differently. This Phenomenon may at some point slow down the pace of teaching and learning; for instance, culture influences students' behaviour, psychology, communication and perception of the world. One way to improve the possibility of teaching and learning is to be sensitive to the diverse nature of students.

In Nigeria, it is so impossible to find a school with students of same culture, tribe, socio-economic status and language. Schools are becoming too difficult to run because of this challenge which needs appropriate attention. In order for teachers to communicate more effectively and to manage the different learning styles of students, the cultural differences of students should be understood; such can result to knowing different learning styles and helping teachers communicate more effectively with students. Teaching and learning is not just about talking and listening as it seems, there are more to them. They are very

expedient as teachers and students' performances are intertwined. In recent times, good teachers work so hard in ensuring above average performance of students in their subject areas, this performance cannot be achieved without a good management style. As long as there has not been any established law that students must be educated in their communities, local government areas or state as the case may be, students' diversity will continue to grow. Teaching and learning involves a good communication relationship between the teachers and the students. Good communication relationship is required in managing diversity. Exercising effective and efficient management of diversity requires thorough understanding of culture and ethnicity amongst others by those willing to co-operate with nature.

Students' Diversity

Students' diversity explains the uniqueness / the identifiable characteristics pertaining to individual student in the school. These characteristics are in differing dimensions such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, culture, lifestyle, language, socio-economic background of students, intelligent quotient (I.Q), physical ability, religious beliefs, political ideologies etc., these can be grouped as the physical, cultural, political, psychological and socio-economic dimensions of diversity. McKeachie and Sviuicki (2006), opine that classroom management problems arise as a result of the diverse nature of students found in a class, they highlight their own areas of dimensions as; attention seekers, students who dominate discussions, inattentive students, students who come to class unprepared, the flatterer, and students with excuse, angry students, discouraged, ready to give up students etc. Tomlinson (1995) recognizes that students vary in their background knowledge, readiness, language, preferences and response to instructions.

In addition to students varying cultural backgrounds, there are also students with special needs; students with learning disabilities, students who are intellectually gifted, students who are mainstreamed, students with physical disabilities etc. Rosado (2007) in Chukunda (2011) also identifies age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disabilities and value system, mindsets, ethics, paradigms, core intelligence as dimensions of students' diversity. The diverse nature of students has always been and it is still very evident in schools. It is imperative that students varied characteristics should be recognized and appreciated in all environments. Diversity is a natural phenomenon; there are no two persons that are alike in all things. Every family has different kinds of children; their differences are exhibited in their homes and in the schools they attend. In the school, they relate with other children; in this way they develop an understanding of what is obtainable in other society other than theirs. Having varied students in the same learning environment exposes them to life experiences, different perspectives, co-existence and creativity. These students are complex entities connected to an ecosystem of influence.

Managing Students' Diversity for Delivering Quality Learning Outcomes

There are diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria, some are found widely dispersed within Nigeria and in neighbouring countries. This is the reason it is impossible for a group to remain in its vicinity all through the years; it also explains that there must be mixture of ethnic groups, culture and styles. Managing students' diverse features in the school provide learning environment that accommodate academic, social, cultural and linguistic needs of the students. To manage students' diversity is to create campus atmosphere that maximizes the academic achievement of all students. It is an attempt to encourage all students in class participation especially the female gender that sometimes experience disadvantage; this gender should not be ill-treated and denied access to education opportunities, such experience can be a tool for discouragement and poor performance.

For globalization and the basic role of women in the society, gender dimension of diversity should be managed with optimistic approach. Managing classroom-found diversity globalizes the world. If there are no global classroom (that is the inclusion of women in classroom activities) globalization will be difficult to attain. Learning exposes all to development of all sorts and the acquisition of special skills for both local and international interaction and gain. One can only benefit from 'global gain' when one is exposed

to the world via education. No wonder the writer sees globalization as the trans-boundary interaction and movement of people, goods, information and culture. Hills (2002) alongside with Tomlinson in Iyayi (2004) acknowledge in support that globalization is the shift towards an integrated, independent world economy and the rapidly developing networks of interconnection and interdependencies that characterize social life.

Rosado (2007) in Chukunda (2011) asserts that managing diversity is an on-going process that uses the various talents and capabilities which a diverse population brings to an organization or society to create a wholesome environment that is safe for differences. Using the above definition, managing students' diversity is the process that actually brings together the capabilities, talents and backgrounds of different students to create an inclusive learning environment. The diverse nature of students should not be a reason for failure or poor performance in their academic work. The teachers must know how to manage all to create an atmosphere of no rejection, no discrimination and that of equal respect. They should ensure that students' diverse natures are recognized and ways of helping them are established and implemented. Anyamele, Nwabueze, & Ememe (2009) similarly note that it is the functions of the school to enable the students develop personal and intellectual attributes that will help them succeed at work and in life generally.

Managing diversity in a total quality manner is the only option open to the school administrators in an ever increasing culturally pluralistic environment. This is because all students who have special needs deserve to be taught appropriately. Rosado (2007) in Chukunda (2011) again opines that managing diversity should be a holistic process. The scholar identifies two dimensions using the holistic idea; primary (age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and disabilities) and secondary (value system, mindsets, ethics, paradigms, core intelligence). These varied dimensions can result to conflicts and on the other side can promote synergetic unity. He also maintains that Total Quality Diversity showcases how exclusive approach of management has been replaced with inclusion. It also aims at helping schools deliver good workforce and nation builders. Harvey, Moon and Geal (1997) in Anyamele et al (2009; 149) opine that:

Employers want people who are going to be effective in a future changing world, people who can deal with change, who can fit rapidly into workplace culture, exhibit good interpersonal skill, ... take on responsibility for an area of work and perform efficiently and effectively to add to the organization. Those concerned in diversity clarification and management needs to examine their cultural attitudes and to develop the pedagogical knowledge, attitude and skills needed to work effectively with students of diverse culture and students with learning disabilities. It is imperative for teachers of this century to develop an understanding of the significance of multicultural model to education. Banks (1994) in Chukunda (2011) notes that many educators have argued that teaching mixed culture will foster greater respect for people of the world, as well as present a more accurate picture of human endeavour and achievement. Frye (1994) in Okata (2008) also argues that some educators have squandered students' potential by using ethnocentric approach to teaching. According to the assimilation model for a society to be held together, the various groups must work to get rid of the social and cultural differences which set them apart. It is very obvious that this model does not reflect the reality of the Nigerian society and it inhibits the functional role of diversity.

In no place is the challenge posed by religion and cultural diversity greater than in the classrooms. To buttress the notion of Frye, the writer explains that Nigeria is a multi-religious nation. It is generally estimated that the religious distribution of the Nigerian population is about 50% Muslim, 40% Christian and 10% indigenous faith (Issah, 2009). These three groups have different beliefs. Religion as a dimension of diversity has to be seriously considered to avoid religious intolerance. The writer further explains that education is the weapon against religious intolerance and that to avoid indifferent attitude or opinion against a different religion, education is the only way one can understand and appreciate the religion of others.

In schools where diversity is not given required attention some sort of social problems may arise. Social problems are encountered by members of the society through contacts. The Nigeria Research Education Council (1977) as cited in Issah (2009) defines a social problem as an unsatisfactory situation in a community (or organization). Inadequate management of social problems in schools can cause both ethnicism and religious crises because more of these social problems surface in schools. The founder of Communist China Mao Tse-Tung (1937) in Issah (2009) asserts that in studying a social problem, one must not be subjective, one sided and superficial. This explains why it is said that a problem can only be solved when the ground cause have been genuinely identified. As for the issue of diversity in schools, total quality diversity management of co-existence of individual differences is the lead to driving it safely. From the foregoing, one can profoundly say that to sustain this known phrase unity-in-diversity, which clearly illustrates peaceful co-existence of all groups in Nigeria, there should be a 'push forward' for diversity by different stakeholders as diversity does not rebel against co-existence, it is lack of respect and value for diversity that actually does. Therefore, the essence of managing students' diversity is to create a system that will work for all beneficiaries. This aspect of change management involves the administrators and the teachers in the process of harnessing prejudice, culture, socio-economic background and religion for equal employment opportunity through equal opportunity in education training and to attain a workforce that will reflect what is obtainable in the society.

Swallow (2020) reveals that in 1964, a US teacher conducted an experiment in otherness and exclusion with an elementary school class to demonstrate to the children the effects of discrimination. This experiment was filmed for future records and the children reactions (both positive and negative) were all recorded. The class was divided into two houses; the red house and the white house. The teacher tried using all possible means to influence and also to persuade the children to believe that one house was better (superior) than the other. The teacher reversed the process of influence to note reactions from members of the two houses. That is, the two houses experienced being in the superior and in the inferior house. The result of this experiment was that the first inferior house members experienced isolation and neglects and so displayed depression, demotivation, aloofness and low performance in academics and in sport. Consequently, there was confusion, hate and resentment against the first superior house of which many of them were friends with children of the first inferior house. The first superior house members showed confidence, strength and resilience in maintaining their superior position. Interestingly, when the experiment was reversed, (that is when the first inferior house members who have experienced insolation and neglects became the second superior house members) their academic ability and overall performance was more than the performance of the other group when they were the first superior. In recent times, this type of experiment may not be accepted in schools regardless of its importance. However, it is very useful in all diversity training sessions because it demonstrates the importance of inclusiveness.

Banks (1994) in Chukunda (2011) succinctly remarks in agreement with the above analogue that the restructuring of schools to deal effectively with the nation's growing diversity and to prepare future citizens who will compete in a global world economy that will be knowledge and service oriented should be enforced. It has been established so far that the usefulness of diversity management in organizations especially the school system cannot be over emphasized. Hence, the writer identifies some of the relevance of managing students' diversity in the 21st century schools to include:

- i) Equal education for diverse students ready for education and for exceptional students (that is those that needs help).
- ii) To help all students develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes they will need to survive with and function effectively in the future in an increasingly diverse society.
- iii) To provide the structures and support that are necessary to build and sustain students' attitudes and self-esteem needed for a successful living.
- iv) To provide a workspace that is multilingual, multicultural, globally sensitive and environmentally conscious with an orientation towards the future (Rosado, 2007 in Chukunda, 2011).

- v) To produce competent ‘global citizens’ who will live and work in a multicultural world. Mayer (1992) in Anyamele, et al (2009) points out that working with others in teams is one of the employments related key competencies.
- vi) To provide a smooth learning climate
- vii) To foster the relationship between the teachers and the students
- viii) To appreciate and show respect to the culture, religion and language of others
- ix) To foster co-existence in the society.

Strategic Approaches to Managing Students’ Diversity in Secondary Schools

Diversity strategies within the school include actions that enable target groups who experience disadvantage to have access to opportunities in education training and employment. Every decision by the school administrators should be tailored towards providing a hospitable environment fit for diversity. In view of this, the administrators should harness the available resources and staff functions efficiently for effective school management and for safe and nurturing environment. The demographic changes require that the school administrators review their management approaches time and time again to ensure high levels of performance from the school and the students. There are different approaches to managing students’ diversity. Some of these approaches include;

School Working Policy: The school administrators are responsible for quality academic delivery of instructions. To this end, policies (such as events and all students’ involvement, students helping other students, diversity celebration and global community awareness) that advocate values for students’ diversity are important towards achieving this phenomenon. Academic programmes that zero the gap between the teaching styles with the learning styles of the students and language programmes that incorporate the language and culture of all Nigerian students should be inclusive in the policy. Operators under this policy have to ensure equal opportunities to all the learners irrespective of their differences. Chukunda, (2011) is of the opinion that the gaps between students’ academic achievements are enormous in most schools in Nigeria. This gap should be covered for equal education opportunity. On the other hand, a strong policy for recruitment of staff from different cultural and ethnic groups should be formulated and strictly adhered to. The composition of staff for all positions such as administrative, teaching, counseling, and the support staff should reflect the sense of diversity in our society. When employees from diverse backgrounds work together the society will have more value and respect for diversity. Olumuyiwa (2014) in Olorunota (2015) reports that in China, South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Japan, and Singapore, students develop interest in learning because Asian societies build their education policies and programmes in accordance with their cultural values, religious belief, language and environment and that in planning, formulation and promulgation of education policies in Nigeria, there is a need to capture the cultural traits of every segment of the society for fair play and integration of every group.

Continuous Staff Development: Old and newly recruited staff should be regularly trained as situation demands. Today’s school and its policies differ from the ones some staff attended. It is very needful to always provide workshops for diversity programmes. In the light of this, Hodgkinson (1991) in Chukunda (2011) asserts that it is true that an increasing percentage of students in schools today are from single parent homes, have parents with special needs, have disabilities and have cultural experiences that are dissimilar from that of their teachers. The programmes will provide opportunity of understanding different segments of diversity and knowing the rudiments for motivation of students. This is why Agih and Christian-Epe (2004) in Kaegon (2015:198) state that “education as a matter of fact, is improvement through learning. The learning methods, ideas, and the people must be in tune with the realities of the times”. Still on this, Moren, Harris and Moran (2011) suggest that a diversity training programme should consist of cultural sections and that strong emphasis be placed on cross-cultural communication for teachers to be made aware of how to use more of inclusive words in communicating with the students.

Teaching Strategies: Teaching strategies (such as oriented, interactive, inter-group and co-operative) that will assist all students to achieve success should be employed. The teachers must adopt strategies that will cause them to listen to the voices of diverse students and avail same students the opportunities to freely express their opinions. It is very necessary to state that co-operative learning can promote interaction between the teachers and the students. It can also promote the acquisition of social skills needed by students and encourage healthy learning and healthy environment. Banks (1991) in Chukunda (2011) opines that Inter-group learning is also a strategy directed towards developing democratic inter-group attitudes and values. Through any of these, when employed by teachers, students will develop positive attitudes towards people from different religious, cultural and gender groups.

Parents Involvement: The school and the home are renowned agents of socialization. Nowadays, the school can only produce quality outcome of a 'Total Child' with the help of the parents. The extent of the problems faced by the administrators of schools towards helping the students attain academic skills needs the parents support. This responsibility of producing the total child is essential for a better society; therefore, there is need for parents' involvement. This involvement entails that the school programmes and activities be communicated to the parents, for them to understand and be equipped to support their children's' academics. This is aimed at ascertaining positive effect on students' achievement.

Good Teacher and Student Relations: Cordial interaction between the teachers and the students will enable them to know more about each other. This is important as it will help the teachers to recognize the needs, perception, expectations, weakness and areas of strength of the students. Good cares rendered to students are integral to good academic attainment. The sustainability of the established good relations between the teachers and the students should be encouraged; as they should always listen to their students, show interest in them, consider their characteristics and work with their preferred learning styles. In line with the above, Black (1999) in Nwankwo (2009) adds that students should be provided with counseling and tutoring services alongside academic support. Black again, illustrates that in a study of fourteen secondary schools in seven Local Education Authorities in England, sixteen students attributed their truancy to problems with their teachers. It shows that some acts in school can cause humiliation, truancy, academic neglect. Interestingly, Smith (1996) in Nwankwo (2009) affirms that negative attitude displayed by some teachers drive some students out of the school. Researches have also shown that insults and humiliating remarks by teachers verbally or on students' report cards can lead to school non-attendance.

Positive Expectations: Having high positive expectation simply entails tolerating all students' excesses, valuing students' differences, anticipating positive performance of students, belief in the ability and wisdom of all students and giving 'praise' feedbacks to students effectively and when necessary. On a serious note, the school administrators have to consider the Pygmalion Effect in dealing with this kind of students.

Curriculum Reform: This process involves changes in the content of the school curriculum. The primary goal of this approach is to incorporate the voices, experiences, and struggles of ethnic, cultural and gender groups into the curriculum. Examples of practices that can be included in the curriculum are celebration of cultural heroes and diverse culture content. Students should be able to perceive concepts, events, issues and problems from different ethnic culture perspectives. Multicultural curriculum will help students make decision on important issues and to take effective civil responsibility (Okata, 2008, Banks, 1991 in Chukunda, 2011).

Conclusion

Change which is the most permanent thing in life has in no small measure affected the school system. Managing students' diversity is indeed an aspect of change in the school system that seems so complex but has so much to contribute in developing students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes to function globally and amongst others to increase educational equality of students. When the differences of students are respected and accommodated in the school, quality learning is attained. Student' diversity management

promotes equity and inclusiveness. Considering the inevitable nature of diversity in schools, the following recommendations are considered necessary;

- i) All those charged with students' responsibilities should be enlightened via conferences on how to handle all diversity matters such that the system enjoys a harmonious co-existence. Lessons on prejudice, cultural awareness and conflict resolution will be helpful to both the teachers and the students.
- ii) Students' in-take, staff recruitment process and instructional materials to be restructured to fit in the new development of students' diversity.
- iii) Co-operation among all staff should be enhanced and made meaningful in order to improve their work (which includes managing students' diversity), and
- iv) A standing school policy on diversity should be established and interpreted to all user systems.

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