THE ROLE OF ASSESSMENT IN IMPROVING

TEACHER QUALITY

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ABSTRACT.

Assessment in education entails the many processes involved in order to achieve educational aims and objectives. The world as a whole is advancing astronomically in many ways and notably in information and communication technology (ICT). However in many countries of the world like Nigeria, ICT is still far from being a part of the education system so that educational practices are still archaic, slow and cumbersome, the result of which is passive teaching and learning. The preoccupation of this paper therefore is the examination of the concept of assessment, teacher quality and examination of some challenges of teachers. This paper goes further to suggest that the way forward for teachers is to improve themselves in spite of government and institutional constraints through the resort to ICT literacy. By so doing, teachers would have access to the educational developments around the globe that could improve the performance of their duties which would in turn both aid in a better achievement of educational aims and objectives as well as the improvement in the professional qualities of teachers themselves. Further recommendations that could aid government, educational institutions and teachers become ICT compliant are given.

Introduction

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is a common feature in most spheres of life today. Many economies including Nigeria and institutions have embraced ICT and the results of their decision are obvious. For instance, the banking sector has gained strides in the quality of service delivery to customers who now enjoy fast, better and more satisfactory services than was obtainable five years ago. World commerce has also greatly improved as it is now possible for a Nigerian to walk into an internet café, browse, order goods from China for example and receive the supply of such goods within days. There is therefore no doubt that the claim of the world being a global village is made possible by ICT.

However, some sectors like education are still backward in the embrace of ICT so that even at the institutional levels, many Universities, Nigeria's highest education institutions do not have active websites. Although, computers are used in the institutions but only skeletally for the typesetting of examination questions, documents and computation of student's results at the departmental levels. Individually, many lecturers do not own personal computers and lack personal knowledge of its operation, so they have not incorporated computerisation into their own routine functions, even though it

is obvious that a common feature of Nigerian schools these days is large classes for which computerisation could be helpful to manage.

Now, more than ever before, lecturers are pressed for time amidst the more and varied challenges to surmount so the adoption of a means to achieve the desired success is not out of place.

The rest of this paper focuses on the following parameters:

- § To highlight assessment vis avis teacher quality in schools.
- § To examine some challenges of teachers in large classes.
- § To conclude.
- § To make recommendations.

1.0 Assessment in schools vis avis teacher quality.

Assessment is a chameleon of a concept that has been given many definitions including the following:

According to Okoye (2005) as cited in Onjewu (2006:2)

> Assessment includes all the processes and the products which describe that nature and extent of . . . learning, its degree of correspondence with the aim and objectives of teaching and the relationship with the environment which are designed to facilitate schooling and learning.

This is a very broad definition that involves all school processes relating to students, staff, the school environment and the teaching and learning processes. Correspondingly, Osasona (2005:1) confirms that "Assessment is

a term used for a wide range of approaches for measuring education effectiveness"

One way of interpreting education effectiveness is through the examination results of learners. Whenever students perform well, their school enjoys a positive assessment report and if not, the assessment report is negative.

Similarly, Urevbu (1991: 18) says that "Assessment deals with how well a student or group of students have learned a particular set of skills or kind of knowledge".

Looking at assessment from this view thrusts a lot of the burden on the teachers who are very critical in any learning institution and this is why, Rice (2003: 1) quotes Sanders and Rivers (1996) and Sanders (1998) affirming that "the single most important factor affecting student achievement is teachers and the effect of teachers on students are both additive and summative".

One could then deduce that for teachers to cope effectively and efficiently, they are required to possess some qualities that could enable them imbibe the necessary skills to cope with the challenges of affecting positively on students.

Teacher quality matters because it is the most important school related factor influencing students' achievement. Hence, many researchers have argued

that teacher quality is a powerful predicator of students' performance (Rice, 2003). Notwithstanding, she adds that

> There are no silver bullets for improving teacher quality . . . a comprehensive approach that touches on . . . a teacher's career is the best strategy for improving teacher quality (p. 4).

In our part of the globe, the challenges ahead of teachers are enormous and if we look at the magnitude we may be scared but rather than that, we must begin somewhere; an effort like this may pay off.

Reichardt, (2000:1) identifies four areas of opportunity that influence teacher quality:

§ *Pre-service*: Educating and certifying of future teachers.

§ *Recruitment and selection*: Attracting the best and brightest teachers to the classroom.

§ *In Service*: Improving teacher's knowledge and skills.

§ *Retention*: Keeping the best teachers in the classroom, particularly in the classrooms where their skills are needed most.

The areas of pre-service and recruitment and selection are not in the control of individual teachers but some aspects of the area of in-service including professional learning among others are. Teachers could improve themselves apart from the institutional arrangements made for the induction of new teachers (absent in most institutions now).

The fact of the matter is that many teachers in our schools and tertiary institutions are not professionals. So, the institution of the Teacher Registration Council amongst which duties includes the registration of all professional teachers and the formulation of a federal government policy that all teacher/lecturers must possess a teaching qualification is a welcome development.

What must have informed the aforementioned development relates to the fact that it is not just anyone who has gone to school that can teach. Sometimes, in Nigerian schools, people who are not professional teachers find themselves in the teaching/lecturing job. One reason for this being that they may have graduated from the institution with good grades and have been retained, served the institution in the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme and were of good conduct or made the necessary contacts or have opted to seek employment in the institution as a means to further their education, where as, we know that the teaching professional goes beyond the mere ability to know a subject matter and then being able to stand in front of learners. Indeed, the strategy for imparting knowledge, the creation of a suitable classroom environment, the use of suitable teaching methods and the efficient cum successful management of learners assessment procedures are among the abilities that the teachers/lecturers must possess.

Even, professional teachers should aim at further and continuous development of themselves as Reichardt (2001: 48) advises that:

> A key to success is the availability of time for teachers to participate in professional learning . . . To improve teacher quality, professional development should be based on . . . and include opportunities for teachers to discuss the instructional practices in which to improve themselves.

The policies that can influence teacher quality are many and the processes of improving teacher quality must be all embracing and this is why it is often not easy for non professionals and people who are in the profession for some ulterior motives other than to be teachers indeed, or people who use the profession as a stepping stone to "greener pastures" to imbibe (Onjewu, 2006).

This presentation after all opines that computer literacy through ICT could aid Teachers' professionalism in a variety of ways particularly in the situation of large classes that have now become a feature of most Nigerian schools and Universities.

Jasman (2001:6) adds that:

> There are two sides of the coin of teacher professionalism. One side of the coin is . . . The other side of the coin is the necessity to demonstrate to others what it means to be a professional.

To be a professional teacher these days, you will agree with me includes computer literacy in order to benefit from the use of the many computer software now available for teachers, to access the internet for teaching methods, teaching materials and lots more.

Thus, there is the conceptualization that teacher professional expertise draws upon multiple traditions like teacher knowledge –Knowing what and knowing how, theoretical and practical, content and pedagogical. Teachers are then advised to be researchers and meaningful research work these days may not be devoid of ICT (Jasman, 2001).

2.0   The Challenges of Teachers in Large Classes

Teachers are crucial to the development of any nation. The National Policy on Education (2004) lends support to the lofty objectives of teacher education as stated in earlier editions of the policy to include:

§   To provide highly motivated, conscientious and efficient classroom teachers.

§   To encourage further the spirit of enquiry and creativity in teachers.

§   To help teachers to fit into the social life of the community and society at large.

§   To enhance teachers commitment to the teaching profession.

Fagbamiye (2006: 3) reports the results of several researchers whose claim include the notion that "these lofty objectives have not been addressed in the course of training teachers". He further says that teacher training in our Universities is characterized with increased numbers of students without any corresponding increase in facilities, resources or personnel for many years.

For this reason, teacher training in Nigeria could be said to be substandard and this could be the reason for the substandard practice in the profession by many teachers. To add to the ugly situation of the poor teacher training is the situation of large classes which according to (Osasona 2005:1) is "one whose numerical size does not permit the teacher to cope effectively with the demands of the individual student", adding that "effective teaching and learning and marking become difficult in these large classes".

It then becomes difficult to reconcile the actual teacher in Nigeria with the definition of a teacher as stated by the Teachers Registration Council as:

> a person who has acquired the requisite knowledge and pedagogical skills with the Nigerian Education System and is hereby qualified to teach at the appropriate level of education in

Nigeria with article 72 of the National Policy on Education which requires teachers at all levels to be professionally trained (Ciwar, 2006 p.4)

This paper is of the view that the above mentioned is the description of the teacher in theory while the teacher in practice described by Ciwar (2005, p.4) is:

Simply anyone with the ability to stand in front of a group of children saying and doing whatever he/she thinks is best in the name of teaching.

Logically, one would think that the teacher in practice should be given very little responsibility until he/she becomes the teacher in theory but the prevailing situation is that, contrary to his capability, he is saddled with the enormous task of contending with the large classes and the implication in terms of learner assessment is vividly captured in the words of Osasona (2005:1) that:

Marking of students' tests, assignment and examination answers is an up hill task for . . . large class lecturers….many of the lecturers teach a total of 500, 700, 800, 1000, 1500 students. Effective teaching, learning and marking become difficult in these large classes. It can easily be deduced that teachers do little or no teaching and evaluation in many cases may be below the demand of educational authorities.

Why teachers may perform below the demands of education authorities when faced with large classes could be attributed to the several challenges they face in the area of the following constraints:

- § Time.
- § Materials
- § Infrastructure.
- § Professional development.
- § Classroom management techniques.
- § Data management.

I hint that most of the above constraints could be diminished or overcome through the embrace and effective use of ICT in the following ways:

In the case of time constraint, the ability to store and retrieve data from ICT could be of immeasurable assistance in saving time. Materials could be easily sourced from the net also made available through ICT. Teachers could develop themselves through ICT because they have access to the papers of the several conferences and workshops that they are not able attend, access to the use of many software to enhance teaching in their discipline as well as the opportunity to access the latest trends and techniques in their profession through ICT. The issue of classroom management techniques is implied in teacher professional development while that of data management is closely tied to time constraint as discussed above.

Consequently, Fagbamiye (2006, 3) advises that:

> The challenges faced by the conventional teacher education in Nigeria must be borne in mind while sensitizing the profession to immersion of teacher education into the globalized world of ICT.

This advice would help future teachers, but what about those already practicing and facing the challenges highlighted which he expressed in the following words:

> Recently, I read in the newspaper that many senior academics –The older ones are not computer literate. If you have never had a computer in your office and you have never had the means to purchase one, it would not be a surprise if you are computer illiterate (p.4).

These words of Fagbamiye succinctly disclose the prevailing situation in our institutions. The computer illiteracy of the academics may not be unconnected with their backwardness. Many of them teach with the same materials they have used for decades and using the same methods. They have not attended a conference in many years and neither do they have computers. Their offices are stack full of old and dirty looking books. The air is stale because the office furniture is old. The lecturers' cars may also be old and rickety and their houses not renovated even once in the past decade. So they feel bored, suffer monotony and work passively being they have to in order to survive. When they have to set or record examination results, they do so manually, using a painstaking approach which is cumbersome and time consuming and

in the end, spend too much time to achieve little in the sense that their output may not be as accurate and credible as when modern methods are applied.

Contrary to the situation of our academics, the youths whom they teach have advanced computer wise. To many of them, not having a computer at home is not a hindrance to their access to it. They patronize the internet shops that have sprung up astronomically within the last decade. They step up the little computer knowledge they acquire from schools through frequent visits to these shops or to the homes of friends or colleagues who have the facility. It is therefore no longer strange for them to often request money from their parents to browse. As a result, many of them source learning materials and vital global information from the internet and are very current about happenings around the globe.

3.0   Conclusion

The true situation of events in our nation is that there is a wide gap between the youths and their University lecturers as far as ICT acquisition is concerned. Indeed, many of the students could swap roles with their lecturers. Although, this situation could yield positive results, it needs a very careful handling. It is a time bomb that must be prevented form exploding. Government, school authorities and lecturers must realise the seriousness of the situation and be resolved to reverse it in order that lecturers would remain

lecturers. According to Fagbamiye (2006, p.6) "the fact is that ICT represents an opportunity to those who can respond to the new paradigm and a threat to those who can not". At the moment, ICT is indeed a threat to most of our lecturers. No matter how we look at it, such lecturers are still relevant to the system and the issue of flushing all of them out has not arisen because form where would their replacement come? Therefore, we have to make do first of all with the lecturers on ground and at the same time, make ICT a compulsory aspect of the education of upcoming lecturers in Nigeria as is the case in many advanced countries in order that both the lecturers and the students they teach have the basic skills of ICT which they could further explore for the development of themselves, the ease of their careers and the general development of their society.

4.0   Recommendation

§ All teacher education programmes should be made to include ICT. Existing ICT programmes should be reviewed and revitalized and this does not mean only theoretically but practically. The situation of teaching ICT without the physical presence of ICT equipment must be discontinued.

§ The lecturers already practicing must realize the changes that they should imbibe. They must learn that in the present dispensation, they

are no longer know-alls but the facilitators of learning and brokers of information sharing. Therefore, they must strive to be ICT compliant.

§ Government should pass a decree on the ICT compliance of all existing lecturers and give a time frame for them to meet up as is being done for teachers to acquire a teaching certificate while the authorities of institutions of learning should ensure the judicious use of all funds meant for ICT, through the provision of ICT equipment and services within their institutions. This would enable lecturers free and easy access to the system and take away the distraction associated with access to the facility outside the premises of the institutions.

§ Government should allocate special funds for the provision of ICT facility in schools and set up a governing institution or machinery that would ensure the compliance in the schools and as well provide the needed routine maintenance services. Apart form the provision of e-laboratories in schools, certain categories of staff should be provided computers in their offices. Those who are not entitled to the facility should be given soft loans in order to acquire theirs. Lecturers should also be encouraged to own laptops which can be carried along to places.

§ There is still the need for people to be sensitized on the need for ICT compliance. The government and University authorities should therefore arrange enlightenment lectures on it and ensure conformity in attendance in order for the creation of more ICT awareness.

§ The general working conditions of lecturers must be looked into. Although much has been done in the past, there is still room for improvement because it is only when lecturers are settled down and happy that they would embrace the thought of improving themselves.

§ Government should improve electricity supply to the nation. ICT is only possible with electricity where there is no alternative power supply. Individual Universities should make provisions for back up when the government power supply fails. Although this is expensive, the gains of ICT are priceless and worth any sacrifice.

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