

Review

Curriculum reform for elementary education in Nigeria

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Nigeria educational system has gone through various developments recently. The selection and organization of curriculum contents distribution and use of teaching materials and its relevance to the curriculum, the need and aspirations of the society are problems associated with Nigeria educational system. Therefore changes have become imperative in the current curriculum for all the educational levels in Nigeria. This is the crux of this paper. Children and youths of today do not live in a “kid-friendly” world. They face serious problems as never before: problems such as substance abuse, teenage pregnancy and youth violence, among others. These events therefore accentuate the fact that we live in a terrible world. Now more than ever, it dawn on us as educators to be diligent in our efforts to educate the child wholly. Many claim it is no longer enough to simply teach Math or Reading Social Studies or Music, effort should be made in teaching “right from wrong”, hence the need for character training curriculum. The benefits of character training education as highlighted in this paper are immense. It includes among others an admiration for quality of character that assures the young that there is the need to be responsible and to act right. The paper concludes with the fact that the school can give a virtuous foundation through the teaching of character training education as an independent subject in primary, post primary and tertiary levels.

Key word: Character, training, reform, curriculum, basic education.

INTRODUCTION

The concept “Character” could be defined as the complex and ethical traits making a person (New World Encyclopedia Vol 23). It is also the stable and distinctive qualities, built into an individual’s life which determines his/her response of circumstances.

Abraham Lincoln said that reputation is the shadow, character is the tree. Therefore, character is not just what one tries to display for others to see, it is who you are even when no one is watching. Good character is doing the right thing because it is right to do it. Character transcends race, religion, education, position, age, gender, and personality. People sometimes think of character as something a person either has or not. Character is in everyone. Those qualities and traits, that determine a person’s response in a given situation is all about the person’s character.

The character Training institute of Oklahoma, USA breaks down character into specific qualities that one can

focus on in order to build character into our lives. By breaking down character into its basic elements, one is better able to focus on building those qualities into our individual lives. As one does so, the individual’s character is improved. Honesty is a good quality, for example. It consists of several more basic qualities-truthfulness, dependability, diligence, etc. Therefore, when a person works on becoming more honest, he does so by becoming more truthful, more dependability, diligent, etc. Furthermore, it is said that character is the foundation for all true success. A person may have money, position or power, but unless he has good character, he or she is not considered to be truly successful – when money is lost, nothing is lost, When health is lost is lost, something is lost, but when character is lost, everything is lost.

Today’s world faces many difficult problems. Especially crime, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic and Workplace violence, gang activity and vandalism, school drop out, broken families etc. All these spring from the lack of misapplication of good character qualities. To find lasting solutions to the problems of our day, there is need to deal with these basics. People must work to improve their own

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character, teach children good character and help those around to improve on their character. Character development is essential to the ongoing process of our society. Hence, there is the urgent need for its introduction to the National School Curriculum, to be taught as an independent subject in primary, post primary and tertiary levels.

Explaining Character Training Education

Powell wrote that an individual step in character training is to put responsibility on the individual. An anonymous sage wrote that moral and character development go hand in hand. One cannot have strong character alone.

In a letter to Alexander Hamilton, George Washington (1788) wrote that character education provides an overview of the guiding principles of character: adaptability, composition, coverage, loyalty, optimism, etc. Character training or education is to undertake to improve our own character quality at a time and apply what we learn in our lives. He (Benjamin Franklin) designed for himself a plan for building character that certainly seems to have been successful. He identified some character qualities that he felt to be better developed in his own place and life, and devise a method of focusing his attention on each of those qualities for one week at a time. Thus, in a year's time he would go through his life over and over again. Character education therefore focuses on seeking to understand the character quality; how it can be applied to our own lives.

In Nigeria, to be specific, there has been a miniature form of character education called "Moral Instruction" in the olden days. As the nation continually experienced political change, the stimulant for educational and other reforms in Nigeria, and as schooling system continue to fall into private hands, the subject faded out. Many schools (private/public) opted for the subjects that suits them, restricting the issue of morality for the family and to an extent mission schools only.

The society is becoming complex daily wives are less active in the homes consequent of the long hours spent each day at work, to supplement whatever is provided for them by the man of the house. This has created more harm to growing children who do anything they feel good that may be bad in adult eyes.

Parents, adults or guardians dump their children only to pick them back on their way back from work. They believe that the school should do everything to inculcate the right values, to their wards. What then happens when a school fails as is the case today?

Should Character Training Education be a Subject of Its Own?

The answer is obvious. It should be a teaching subject of its own. Beside the different religious prevalent in Nigeria, character education cuts across. It is not a one sided affair. To buttress this point further, the following yardsticks are found relevant:

Involve children in problem solving. What better way to involve children in solving a problem than in a classroom situation. Offer activities and toys that encourage children to think. Offer children time to consider options and overcome obstacles, taking a few extra moments to finish a puzzle can help a child develop a desire to follow through. Create an engaging and supportive environment. Acknowledge initiative and positive decision making. Highlight positive behaviour. Create an atmosphere in which they can display their art works. It could mean the world to them. Offer children opportunities to make decisions. Children who practice making choices learn that there are options. Give children (in the class and as a teacher) the opportunity to plan for the future such as deciding whether to go to the library or the park after lunch. This helps children develop confidence.

As a teacher, develop confidence and desired behaviour. Children learn from the teacher more than from their family because the child spends more active time at school than at home. Share the way they practice their values. In as much as we try to inculcate in children the right values, care should be taken to avoid labeling them as "bad boys/children". This does not support the development of positive traits.

It is common place in schools to find guidance and counselors. When not available, the teacher acts in that capacity. Guidance talks help children to understand and put words to feelings. Understanding this helps them to understand how their actions have an effect on others, and that they will need to learn how to take others into consideration.

A guidance talk is when an adult permit the pupils/students to identify the problems; invite them to say their feelings; brainstorm solutions together and help them to come to a decision; incorporate the solution and follow up with them. A guidance talk can give children time to reflect on a situation. Teachers, guardians, parents or adults provide guidance, children as young as four upwards learn how to resolve their problems.

Looking at these and more, you will agree that character education should be included as a teaching subject, like Mathematics, Science, English and Religious

Studies; it should be accorded the same status. It should be taught as an independent subject. Topics such as courage, optimism, bribery and corruption, friendliness, love, discipline, punctuality, politeness, godliness, drug abuse among others should make up the topics.

In higher classes (Secondary/tertiary institutions), topics such as bribery and corruption, kidnapping, thuggery, arson, suicide, loyalty and honesty etc may be treated in depth. This is because the brain is more developed to accommodate more intensive pieces of information.

Benefits of Character Training Education

It creates a moral awareness in the development of character, producing a community sensitive to transcendent values. This ethical ideal is based on qualities, highly regarded in other communities of the world, from the past to the present, and is the foundation upon which a credible democracy is based.

Through character training education, traits of integrity is developed. Through this basic ethics program, it is our pleasure to train whole schools demonstrating for them how to develop traits and civic virtue in youth both at home and in the local system. This belief help instill in our children more than ever the need to place moral values that will help them know right from wrong in later years.

It creates an admiration in the child for quality character. We wish to create an admiration for quality of character that assures the young that there is a price to do what is right. That personal responsibility is admirable. That behaviour have consequences. That family can give only but an aspect of virtuous foundation for the child. The school does more to form the child's strong conviction and consciousness to do things. That good character does give a sense of well being to each child as it takes its place in the world.

It goes further to contribute purposeful moral strategy which is implanting virtues in our school communities, nations and international family of nations. We then see that teaching invariable moral truths, which are consistent, concrete, and culturally creative create an understanding of compassion, loyalty to character values and respect for the ethnic differences in people living in planet earth.

It prepares youth-serving adults to be efficient character models in future and equip them with proven techniques that have made 'CHARACTER COUNTS' the most valuable and most widely accepted methodology to character education.

With sinking moral standards in our society consequent of unnecessary exposure to westernization, television, internet and other media such as print etc, character education thus avails the child:

- Learn proven strategies for effective, sustainable character education.

- Reignite with new life your professional development and effectiveness on character development building.

- That life is all about living right; doing the right thing even as the wrong thing keeps starring at our faces. Bad, ugly, wrong ways, of life is rife, but that can be changed as soon kids are exposed to character education/training. Furthermore, events such as that of September 11th in USA serve as a punctuation mark accentuating the fact that we live in a violent world. Therefore, it is no longer enough to teach math or reading, social studies or music, but a character training education to show children right from wrong. Children know that they live in a "Kid unfriendly world", so they are eager to discover secrets of living in such an unkind environment. They face problems such as teen pregnancy, drug and or substance abuse, youth violence etc. These are all ethnical issues. The long term solution to solving these problems is to develop a societal norm based on a limited number of core values, and this will be done through character training education.

Finally, character education helps schools create a safe, caring and inclusive learning environment for every student and support academic development. It fosters qualities that will help students be successful as global citizens, in the work place, and with the academic curriculum it lays the foundation to help students become successful in all the goals we have for our schooling system. It is the common denominator that will help schools reach all their goals. Character education is not one more thing on your agenda! It is the agenda itself. The time to use it is now. (Lickonia, 1991).

Hints in Teaching Character Education

a) Use language that explains, and that is in accordance to the age of the learner. The language that informs pupils of primary two is quite different from that of JS three students. Therefore, to ensure that the instructional objectives are met, the instructional communication medium should consider the age, level and psychology of the children. The instructor (teacher) too should have a relatively good command of the spoken medium of communication. That way, the information will be passed and decoded respectively. For instance, comprehension passages pertaining to "The menace of Drug Abuse" or "The Effects of Smoking" or "The Best way to behave in Exams" could be selected for study. Care should be taken to drive home the points in simple impeccable English or any language of communication employed.

b) Highlight positive behaviour; it supports optimism in children. Acknowledge children's pride. A mound of blocks may mean nothing to an adult but to children, it is a masterpiece. Therefore, a teacher should employ teaching aids that drive home the point. Show appreciation for children's creativity. Displaying their

artistry could mean the world to them. Tossing them off could crush their spirits.

How Character Education can be Taught in Primary and Secondary Schools

The central responsibility of the school is to help pupils/students acquire those attitudes that will be needed in adult life. This can be achieved through teaching the following values.

I Honesty and Loyalty

The goal is to explore ways to foster an understanding of honesty and loyalty in younger children. They go hand in hand. Like many other principles of character, honesty is supreme. It is sincerity and not deceiving others. Honesty or truthfulness means not taking advantage of another person's trust. Loyalty entails being reliable and fulfilling commitment to other. One cannot have one without the other. Therefore, if children are taught from this early stage of their development why loyalty and honesty should be their watch-ward, they will live by it throughout life.

II Courage and Hard work

Courage can be demonstrated in many ways, from extreme heroism in times of devastation, to standing up for one's personal beliefs. Both are equally valiant, and entails a great deal of thought, compassion, fear and integrity, while hard work is the driving force that ensures you get something done as and when due. As a teacher, especially in primary school, the bedrock of formal education every where, explain to the kids that hardwork means working really hard, and it leads to achieving great results. Tell them the people demonstrate courage when they overcome fear. At the root of hardwork and courage lies virtues like honesty, faith, hope, sacrifice, love and integrity. Courage has to do with the application of several skills including will-power, composure, and empathy. Adults can help young children learn to suite themselves as well as understand feelings by talking through challenging situations.

Children can demonstrate hardwork and courage when challenged. Often times, hardships can push them to test their own strengths and will-power. For example, consider a younger girl who uses her words to defend herself after an older child cuts in front of her. Although she may fear the older child, she believes that the action was unfair but decides to act peacefully. Hence, it is highly recommended to teach kids these virtues.

III Initiative and Perseverance

This has the utmost goal of exploring strategies that support the development of children's capacity to take initiative and persevere in their undertakings. It is to inculcate in children that they mustn't wait for an external stimuli before taking an initiative. Also, in the slightest of trails and tribulations, they should persevere. This is to drive home the point that life after all is not a bed of roses, but that if one persevere, as the proverbial saying goes that " the patient dog eat the fattened bone", he/she will reap his reward.

IV Optimism

This is employed as a genre of character training education because it explore strategies that support the development of positive thinking about oneself, other people and one's environment.

In our Nation today, bribery and corruptions is rife, among other vices. So, build in them the belief that it will be better someday soon.

V Punctuality and Discipline

Punctuality they say is the sole of business. From early as primary one, expose them to the immense benefits of been punctual to school, appointments, religious meetings/assembly etc. Discuss the 'African/Nigeria time syndrome. Foster in them the gains of sleeping early. It ensures you wake up early.

Discipline on the other hand means self control, coolness, orderliness, strength of mind and will. Teach children the act of self control especially on matters pertaining to food, electronics etc. Inculcate in them, that you don't enter someone's house and see a computer on, and because you are good on it, you go right ahead, or pick the remote control and change channels. It is wrong.

VI Compassion

Children need a culture of caring. Young children feel validated when adults are attentive to their feelings. They demonstrate empathy when they observe another person's feeling and respond with care and concern. They begin to understand how and when to apologize when they recognize emotions in themselves and others. Talking children through a conflict can help them to build empathy (compassion)

VII Prudence

This means caution in practical affairs; care taken in the management of one's resources and of others. It also means consideration for one's own interest. Children taught the practical and cautious (careful) ways in providing for the future, re-exercising good judgment etc. this way, they will not be wasteful.

VIII Obedience and Respect

Obedience means the quality of being obedient. The act of being dutiful or submissive. Children should be taught to obey rules and regulations that govern the school, the home, etc. that way,, they will forever remain submissive to constituted authority.

Respect means the state of being honoured or esteemed. A polite or kind way to regard oneself and others. They often say respect is reciprocal. When a child learns to respect, he/she will be respected, no matter how young or old.

IX Politeness

This means decency, courtesy, graciousness, respectfulness, good manner etc. For instance, a teacher could demonstrate to learners that it doesn't mean disrespectful to tell your teacher, older friend etc that what he did yesterday or the hour ago isn't good at all. He (the child) should tell him (the teacher) what should be done, in suggestive and polite terms.

X Patriotism and love of Neighbour

Patriotism means love of one's country. It goes hand in hand with love of oneself, one's neighbour and the likes. Among all these virtues, if love doesn't exist, it is useless. Because, if there is love, the child will obey others, will be punctual, will be courageous, will be polite, will be respectable etc. This is king of all virtues. Imbibe in them the great virtue of love. As soon as love attributes are seen in them, I am sure the utmost goal of character education will be met.

Other associative virtues to love include kindness, friendliness to our neighbour etc.

XI Diligence

Diligence means being careful, thorough, meticulous and steady in the effort put in a task. Proper attention or care. Children should be made to understand that they need to be careful and persevering in carrying out task more diligently.

XII Success

After all these virtues have been made manifest in children, victory, triumph, positive result or favourable outcome comes to the fore. It is the feeling that you have done it. When children know that success is theirs but they must strive to exhibit all these characteristics, they will work harder. For success is dependent upon hardwork.

RECOMMENDATION/CONCLUSION

Curriculum reforms that are realistic are child centred, that is quick in rejuvenating and revitalizing hope and passion for acquisition of broad based knowledge that is worth while in a learner should be the focus of the structure. Methodology that will aid self discovery and problem-solving ability which allows learners the opportunity for creativity should be enshrined in the curriculum. Quality and relevance are two features that curriculum development in Nigeria now needs. Equally, change and innovations of a school system of our globalized environment must involve the emergence of elastic curriculum models and educational policies which emphasize a re-orientation of the "total man concept" through a conscious effort in inculcating sound moral values in our youths. The need for a paradigm shift from theoretical and proper certification to a practical application and sound character development of knowledge necessary for the emergence of future disciplined leaders of tomorrow should be the cardinal objective of Nigeria education. Emphasis should be on the changing needs of the society through reliance on the understanding and application of innovative elements in our educational system. Hence, character training curriculum. The society is getting more and more complicated with reports of violence every where. Our children are becoming increasingly scared and vulnerable day in, day out. Indeed, our education is gradually going through bleak moments. The way forward to stem this tide is by introducing "Character training curriculum" in all primary, post primary and tertiary institutions. Character education should be taught as a subject. This will help to curb some of the social ills and menace that some of our youths of today are involved in. It will also expose vices to the children in a way to proffer solutions to them, to become better citizens. That way, the days ahead will be better than days now.

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