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Catching them young: The experiences of children art instructors in Nigeria

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Abstract

Literature shows that art plays a vital role in the wholesome development of children. Aside from providing opportunity for playful fun, art provides opportunity for the nurturing of creative talents and potentials of children while enabling them to create and appreciate beauty. Teaching of art in Nigerian primary and secondary schools is increasingly gaining popularity. However, unlike the more theoretical subjects, which have more established and standardised pedagogic tradition, the teaching of art appears to be left to the discretion of the instructors. Using mainly interviews, this paper documents the teaching experiences of art instructors in selected junior secondary schools in Lagos, Nigeria, focusing mainly on their pedagogic styles, challenges encountered and prospects of art education in Nigerian schools.

Keywords: arts education, children education, instructor, Nigeria.

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1. Introduction

Art can be described as meaningful creative expression. Although it can be for aesthetic purposes, art evokes meaning especially when viewed within its context. In several communities, art is also seen as a means of communication of ideas, beliefs and norms. Several studies have highlighted the benefits of art to the individual and society at large. Development of artistic skills is argued as crucial to the wholesome development of children, enabling them to fit into the wider society. Enabling children acquire these skills either at home or within academic environments has been fraught with challenges. Apart from the low recognition accorded art as a subject many teachers are not properly equipped to transfer artistic skills. This paper examined the teaching experiences of art teachers in some junior secondary schools located in Lagos, Nigeria in order to identify the methods they adopt in teaching arts to children as well as the constraints they encounter.

2. Literature Review

Art is a means of communicating ideas, feelings, and solutions in a way other than verbally or written. Several studies have shown that art prepares children for future life experiences in a variety of ways. These benefits include promotion of mental and innovative ability; improved academic performance; development of self-esteem, self-discipline, cooperation, self-motivation, social integration; cultural awareness; development of creative problem-solving and communication skills (Mulder-Slater, 2001). Root-Bernstein and Root-Bernstein (2013) identified arts and crafts trainable skills, which enhance science, technology, engineering and mathematics success in classrooms. These include observing; imaging and visualization; abstracting; pattern recognition and pattern invention; analogizing; dimensional thinking; modelling; body or kinaesthetic thinking; manual dexterity; familiarity with tools; transforming data into visual or graphical forms; converting theories into mechanical procedures; and understanding data and experiments kinaesthetically and empathetically. In many schools however, art is not seen as a priority subject (Mulder-Slater, 2001). This is perhaps due to the misconception that art is a luxury superfluous and isolated subject. Basic art materials include paper; pencils; crayons; markers; model materials, chalk and oil pastels; scissors; glue; paint; brushes and found objects.

2.1. Art education in Nigeria

Although western education was introduced in Nigeria in 1842, teaching of art did not start until 1923 when some secondary schools were selected for the pilot study in Lagos. Due to shortage of trained teachers, some traditionalist artists (those who acquired artistic skills via traditional apprenticeship) were co-opted to augment the teaching stock. Art training at this early stage consisted mainly of the students' attempt to replicate what the teacher has drawn on the board. The current system of education in Nigeria (9-3-4) aims at providing the child appropriate skills and values, which will equip him for employment and contribution to national development (Etuk, Ering & Ajake, 2012). This system devotes the first nine years to compulsory basic education at the primary (6 years) and junior secondary (3 years) levels, three years to senior secondary education and the last four years to tertiary education (Uwaifo & Uddin, 2009). Art is one of the compulsory subjects taught at the basic education levels. Art education in Nigeria aims at inculcating in children the spirit of enquiry and creativity while developing their basic skills including those needed for proper adjustment and contribution to society (Akinwunmi, 2011). The National policy on Education provides guidelines for teaching in schools. Challenges currently encountered in art education include lack of teachers, poor funding and general lack of appreciation of art.

2.2. Pedagogy and art education

Pedagogy is the art and science of teaching (Tsafe, 2013). Teaching is complex. The teacher is a major stakeholder in the teaching process. His pedagogical reasoning skills can make or mar the outcome. Good application of pedagogical knowledge improves academic performance (Timothy, 1991). Thus, Tsafe (2013) stresses the need for adequate knowledge and practice of the techniques and strategies for effective teaching. This implies that knowledge of the subject matter (content knowledge) is not enough. Okanlawon & Daniel (2009) opine that although traditionally, teachers are taught content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, there exists a missing link between the two. Consequently, Tsafe (2013) advocates adequate pedagogical content knowledge in teaching. This essentially is bridging the gap between content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge. According to Okanlawon & Daniel (2009) it is “a teacher’s unique knowledge of how to create learning opportunities that make particular content more comprehensible to others. Such learning opportunities may include metaphors, demonstrations, activities, and examples that are tailored to the needs of particular group of learners.” Good pedagogical content knowledge will include content knowledge; understanding of students’ conception of the subject and its learning and teaching implications; pedagogical knowledge; curriculum knowledge; knowledge of educational context and knowledge of purpose of education.

3. Methodology

The method of enquiry adopted in gathering data for this study was mainly the interview method, which was complimented by observations of classrooms and class activities. Availability of art teachers was a major criterion in selecting schools studied. Consequently, sixteen schools were purposively selected. Art teachers in the selected schools were interviewed using an interview guide designed for the study. Data obtained during interviews were coded and content-analysed to unveil common themes. Interviews were conducted within school premises. However, privacy was ensured to enable interviewed teachers’ respond to questions honestly.

4. Findings and discussions

Salient findings of the study are presented and discussed in this section. The study found that 87.5% of teachers interviewed were male, while majority of teachers (93.75%) had been in their schools for less than five years as well as being on part-time. Only 31.25% of the teachers had education training in addition to their art background. This indicates a dearth of qualified art teachers. A qualified teacher possesses both content and pedagogic knowledge. It can also be inferred that there are very few female art teachers probably because art is not considered socio-culturally appropriate for women. Data also suggests a high turnover of art teachers, a situation that may not provide them adequate time to understand the peculiarities of their particular schools in order to adopt suitable pedagogical approach. Part-time teaching as revealed in this study, while providing teachers opportunity for multiple streams of income, may not engender total commitment to imparting knowledge to students. This is because as revealed by the study, part-time teachers spend limited time in the schools and thus are rarely available for sustained interaction with, and consultation by students.

4.1. Pedagogical style

Although the National policy on Education provides guidelines for teaching, there is room for flexibility. The teachers were asked the teaching methods they adopt in teaching art. The responses were varied but are summarised here. Some of those interviewed opined that they study the students to identify their potentials and weaknesses and guide them accordingly. In doing this sometimes they rely on available research. This was necessary since students have

differing level of art appreciation. All of the teachers reported adoption of a combination of teaching methods in order to keep the students busy, sustain their interest, and bring out their best in an easy and fast way. Students are presented theoretical background on a subject matter. This includes the basic principles and relevant steps to follow. Students are encouraged to copy notes provided by the teachers, which serve as reference materials in addition to recommended textbooks. Teaching is often enriched with demonstrations, dramatization, and illustrations using instructional materials like samples of previous works. Students are then given individual and group tasks to be carried out during and outside school hours. They are encouraged to apply taught principles in their class work and assignments. Occasionally, brainstorming sessions and excursions are also organised for the students under teachers' guidance. Teachers stressed the need to encourage the students and assuring them. It can be seen that the combination of methods generally adopted by teachers possess the potentials of providing students opportunities to learn and internalise procedural skills by receiving instructions, observing, exploring, solving problems and hands-on practice.

4.1. Challenges and prospects

The teachers reported some challenges militating against their efforts. Many of the schools do not have conducive art teaching and learning environment. There were no dedicated art laboratories or studios in any of the schools visited. Regular classrooms used do not allow students sufficient freedom and flexibility. Teachers believe this inhibits students' creativity. Teachers also reported differences in the learning abilities of the students. While some are slow in learning, a couple of them do not show interest and fail to undertake assignments. Inadequate time allocation often means that teaching class sessions are often rushed. Some teachers also feel the curricular is overloaded. Inadequate funding was reported by all teachers and was evident in lack of instructional materials including art materials. Some of the teachers expressed concern over their ability to effectively communicate with the students. Some teachers felt their welfare package should be enhanced especially considering their huge workload, as they were the only ones teaching the subject in their schools.

Despite these challenges, all of the teachers believe that art is fun and has a vital role to play in the wholesome development of children. Creative skills developed at this stage can help students in their future endeavours, assisting them to relate to others and contribute to society. It has potentials for enhancing self-esteem, self-reliance and fulfilment.

5. Conclusion

The poor appreciation of arts and crafts in education was evident in poor funding, inadequacy of space and facilities as well as insufficient time allocation for class work. Teachers perceive such a situation as restrictive and stifling creativity. Another major conclusion arising from this paper is the widespread use of contract staff in teaching art at junior secondary level in Lagos. Teaching a subject like art at the secondary level demands a lot of student/teacher contact, which does not appear to exist presently due to this part-time nature of the teachers' employment. Several of the teachers appear engaged in other jobs. Data from this paper also suggests a dearth of adequately trained art teachers who have been trained both as artists and teachers. Prevalent gender disparity observed amongst art appears contrary to observations in other subjects and thus suggests that art is viewed as a male preserve.

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