

Teacher Capacity Building and Effective Teaching and Learning: A Seamless Connection

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Abstract *This paper explores the trajectories between teacher capacity building and effective teaching and learning with particular reference to the Nigerian context where the education system is facing unprecedented challenges. Paradoxically, the solutions appear to be elusive. This paper argues that as micro-level practitioners, teachers constitute the nexus of any sustainable transformation of the system. To achieve this goal as well as to stem the tide of teacher underperformance, a central argument in the paper is that building teacher capacity is not only critical to successful teaching and learning, it should also be the starting point for reconstituting the education system. Towards this end, the paper identifies three context-responsive areas of strategic intervention vis à vis teacher capacity building.*

Introduction

Virtually all stakeholders in education agree that as micro-level practitioners teachers represent a centripetal force in most educational systems. There is also a consensus that their performance is inextricably linked to educational outcomes for both learners and the system alike. This paper explores a crucial but, sometimes neglected area of educational discourse- building teacher capacity for successful teaching and learning in the context of the 21st century, with special reference to Nigeria. The paper proceeds from the assumption that educational reforms can, at best, be only marginally successful without addressing the “teacher” question in substantive ways. This is particularly true in the case of Nigeria where massive student academic failure has been attributed in part, to teachers who, as the arguments goes, have not been carrying out their primary mandates of teaching and promoting learning with quantifiable success. Arong and Ogbadu (2010) provide a précis of the debate in the following analysis of the state of education in Nigeria:

The Nigerian school system is increasingly challenged with many complex problems. There is a general outcry that the standards of education are falling and morals flagging. Some blame pupils for this apparent decline in quality of education and moral values. A thoughtful few think that they are due to the nature of changes in all directions. *Majority blame the teachers for the woes in our schools. They are not as devoted and dedicated to the cause of education as their predecessors* [my emphasis]. Teachers as a group blame parents and the children. They also blame government for unattractive condition of service and poor physical facilities in some parts of the educational system (p. 62).

Beyond the hair splitting, the important question one should be asking is why teachers in Nigeria are underperforming. I would argue that the answers to this question coalesce around two fundamental issues: variables that are linked to teachers themselves and, policy-related variables as evidenced in teacher education policies, resource allocation and, the failure to build teacher capacity in any significant way.

Understanding the Concept of Capacity Building

The concept of capacity building has become a buzz word in education reform discourse internationally both in developed and emerging economies. However, despite its wide usage, it is an often misunderstood social construct. For conceptual clarity then, I begin with a definition of “capacity building”. At its most basic analysis, capacity building has to do with the allocation of, and investment in resources- physical, intellectual or human especially when other intervening variables have failed within a given institutional or social context.

To a certain extent, a systematic focus on capacity building within a given social sector in most

societies, is an indication of disequilibrium within that particular sector even though capacity building should, ideally and proactively, be an integral part of strengthening social institutions and providing enabling conditions for premium performance by the individuals within the sector. Why should governments and other policy makers focus on capacity building? According to McDonnell and Elmore (1991, as cited in Delaney, 2002) the benefits of capacity building are consequential, "in the short term, [they accrue] to the specific individuals and institutions that are their recipients, but the ultimate beneficiaries are future members of society, whose interests cannot be clearly determined in the present". Crucially, for capacity building to be effective, it must respond to the growth and development needs of the individual as well as those of the relevant institutions.

For all practical purposes, building teacher capacity is, ultimately, engendering development, growth and excellence within an education system.

Rationale for Advocating Teacher Capacity Building

Why advocate capacity building and what is the likely impact on teaching and learning and subsequently, the educational success of students in Nigeria? Without going into details, the problems within the teaching sector in Nigeria are by now quite well known even to cursory observers who have only a passing interest in education. Currently, there is a general perception that a significant number of Nigerian teachers are not equipped to deliver quality education for a number of interconnected reasons chief among them being training-related issues (policy, structural and curricular), infrastructural limitations and low morale.

Many agree that Nigerian education no longer offers to beneficiaries what it used to. The colossal level of student failure in the country is a clear indication of the fact that there are significant problems within the system. Data from W.A.E.C and NECO examination results from the last several years show that less than 30 % of the students who sat for these examinations received credit in mathematics and English Language.

This means that students in Nigeria are not receiving the kind of education that will prepare them for life in a competitive 21st Century world that demands innovation, creativity, critical thinking skills, vision, adaptable and transferable skills. Equally worrisome, with few exceptions, a cursory look at the results of some international standardized achievement tests show that Nigerian students are noticeably absent in these examinations. Given Nigeria's position in Africa, there is no excuse for the absence of Nigerian students in international examinations such as TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PIRLS (Progress in Reading Literacy Study). If the culture of student failure persists, the nation's goal of becoming one of the world's noteworthy economies through Vision 2020 would be difficult to achieve.

As economists and educational experts have argued, the output of education is a durable capital asset the possession of which increases the overall quality of life in most societies. Indeed, within the context of the 21st century, it is safe to argue that there is no society without a solid education system. Increasing student achievement depends on teachers whose performance in turn, hinges on building their capacity. With regards to economic development, it should be emphasized that the quality of education as demonstrated by the quality of teaching, facilities and curricula, matters in very important ways (Todaro and Smith, 2012).

Across much of the developed world, there is a renewed emphasis on the quality of teachers and teacher education. Indeed, no nation can build a strong and effective educational system without the continuous appraisal and subsequent improvement of its teacher training programmes since teachers remain the pillars of the system (Niyozov, 2008). A government may promulgate macro-level policies however, until they are interpreted and delivered to students at the micro-level, they remain just that- words and ideas on paper (Egbo, 2009). Disregarding the professional needs of teachers is, in effect, inimical to the progress of Nigeria's educational system. In developed countries, significant resources are committed to capacity building as a critical aspect of developing the best possible system. For instance, even though education is a provincial affair in Canada, the various provincial governments make concerted efforts to support teachers in their work including enacting policies and legislation that mandate continuous professional learning for

teachers. So important is teacher professional growth that there are designated professional development days in schools' calendars during the course of an academic year in most provinces.

Another powerful rationale. Much has been said about sustainable development in the 21st century. However, none of the programmes will be successful without the availability of qualified teachers at the classroom level. For example, while only one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)- achieving universal primary education, explicitly deals with education, the success of the other seven i.e. eradicating extreme hunger and poverty, promoting and empowering women, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, combating HIV/AIDs, malaria and other diseases, ensuring environmental sustainability and developing global partnership for development, hinges on robust education systems and, implicitly, on effective teaching and learning.

Three Areas of Strategic Intervention

In building teacher capacity, the focus should be on several but, in particular, the following broad areas: policy, training, and pedagogy, infrastructure development and, teacher welfare and empowerment as depicted in Figure 1. Because it is, quite often, the area that is accorded the most significant attention in capacity building initiatives, I begin with the first intervention.

Policy, Training, and Pedagogy

A targeted focus on teacher education should be the nexus of current education reform endeavours in Nigeria. The government itself is cognizant of the importance of the availability of qualified and effective teachers if the nation is to achieve its national development objectives as well as meet its commitments to such international initiatives as Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). For example, as a recognition of the importance of appropriate teacher training in developing a viable education system, the National Policy on Education (2004, revised) stipulates that all teachers in educational institutions should be professionally trained based on clearly specified goals and objectives. Also, one of the stated education sector goals in the federal government's previous socio-economic development framework- the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), was to:

Enhance the efficiency, resourcefulness, and competence of teachers and other educational personnel through training, *capacity building* [my emphasis], and motivation... Ensure that 80 percent of primary school teachers acquire the minimum teaching qualification (the National Certificate in Education)... Ensure that 90 percent of secondary school teachers obtain professional qualifications (B.Ed., PGDE), (NEEDS Document 2004, p.35).

Unfortunately, despite extensive policy enactment and legislation, teacher education and the teaching profession remain problematic subsectors within the education system (Osuji, 2009; Udofot, 2005). Building teacher capacity in Nigeria should, therefore, include a re-conceptualization of the processes that are involved in teacher certification and licensure. Not only should the scope of the curriculum be broadened to reflect Nigeria's requirements for sustainable development, it should also be reflective of a complex global arena that is gradually trending towards a post-oil era. Perhaps even more important, it is crucial that only the right kind of people are recruited into initial training programmes since one cannot justify allocating resources to building the capacity of those who lack the basic foundation for a positive outcome from such an investment.

With regards to in-service practitioners, some teachers continue to adhere to the traditional pedagogical orientations that informed their training. The popular assertion that teachers generally teach the way they were taught is not entirely unfounded. Indeed, some teachers are reluctant to think outside the box preferring instead to see their role as one of simply transmitting the official knowledge that they were mandated to teach. Sometimes, even those who want to adopt empowering strategies as routine practice are

constrained by a lack of the pedagogical knowledge to do so. In effect, in-service and continuous professional development for teachers programmes should be geared towards the following:

- Using local materials to support teaching,
- Integrating technology across the curriculum;
- Learner-centred approaches to teaching and learning (e.g. experiential and inquiry learning, critical pedagogy)
- Teaching for sustainability
- Effective classroom management
- Teaching for social justice
- Strategies for upholding the standards of the profession.

Availability of Twenty-First Century Infrastructure

Building teacher capacity means that the government and policy makers must provide the necessary resources, materials and 'tools' that are required to teach effectively. It is impossible to deliver 21st Century education with 19th century tools. Similarly, it is unrealistic to promote teaching excellence in environments that predispose both teachers and learners to failure. While like everyone else teachers vary in their abilities and personal characteristics, the availability of the requisite infrastructure and materials, makes it more likely that a majority will succeed in their teaching and pedagogical practices (Egbo, 2005a).

Both research and anecdotal evidence emphasize the fact that school environments that promote effective teaching and learning are those that are adequately equipped with educational materials and infrastructure. In Nigeria, many teachers teach in large classes that make individualized instruction at all levels of the system virtually impossible. Unfortunately, as research also tells us, large classes are inimical to effective teaching and learning. Theories and studies abound that underscore the fact that individuals vary in their approaches to learning. For instance, some people learn visually, others auditorily, still others learn experientially. In his influential theory of multiple intelligences (MI), psychologist Howard Gardner argues that human beings possess different types of intelligence that enable them to solve problems differentially. In his reformulated MI theory, Gardner (1999) posits that there are at least nine types of human intelligences which undergird how people make meaning of their learning experiences. Underpinning Gardner's theory is the recognition of individual differences which means that students should not be treated the same as Gardner himself argues in the following:

I regard MI theory as a ringing endorsement of three key prepositions: We are not all the same; we do not all have the same kinds of minds (that is, we are not all distinct points on a single bell curve); and education works most effectively if these differences are taken into account rather than denied or ignored. ... At the practical level, it suggests that any uniform educational approach is likely to serve only a small percentage of children optimally (1999, p. 91).

The point I am making here is that while we know that children should be treated differentially according to their strengths and abilities (or intelligences according to Gardner's theory), yet the typical Nigerian classroom environments make teaching and learning challenging. Many schools lack ICTs, laboratories and collateral equipment. They also lack libraries which are critical to student success especially given the fact that a majority of the student population does not have access to reading materials at home. The school library is, therefore, the only space where they can access reading materials besides the required textbooks.

Obviously, students, who cannot read or write effectively, cannot be successful in examinations or in school more generally just as teachers cannot teach students with low literacy and numeracy levels. Given the prevailing learning conditions, it should not be surprising that graduates at all levels of the education system (from primary to tertiary levels) do not demonstrate commensurate knowledge, competency or proficiency.

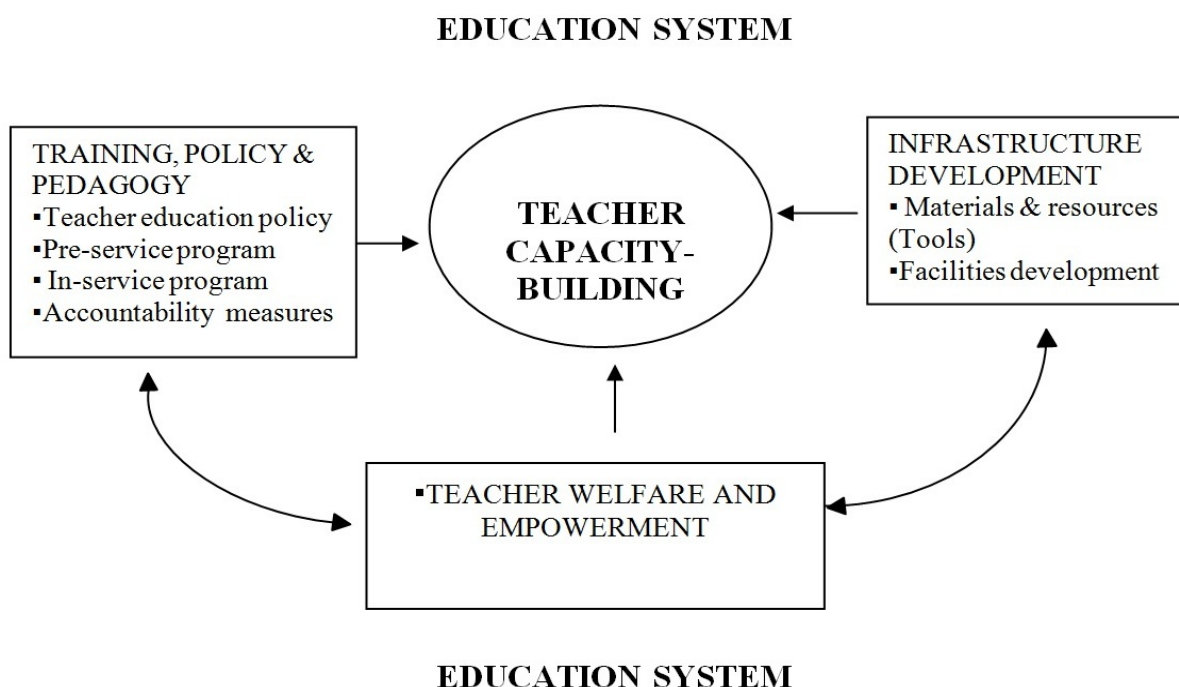
Teacher Welfare and Empowerment

The provision of quality education transcends the curriculum and the teaching and learning process. It must also include collateral interventions. While this should not license teachers to professional lethargy and misconduct, research has shown that there is a correlation between teachers' perception that their basic needs for survival are being met and their tendency to act in professional and committed ways. In every education system, low morale and motivation often leads to poor teacher performance. Unfortunately, low morale among teachers in Nigeria is a common phenomenon as Udofot (2005) points out:

Nigerian teachers are the most traumatised and the most de-motivated in the world from the primary to the tertiary level. They are ...de-motivated right from the time they are recruited into the profession through their training to the period of deployment. Even when they retire from the service they are not paid their retirement entitlement.... this phenomenon does not only affect their job performance of the Nigerian teacher but also his [or her] psyche. ... If it is true that the teacher is the key person in the education system whose training could mar or improve the education results, it could be argued that the much talked about qualitative education in Nigeria now and in future would be an illusion if the circumstances of the Nigerian teacher are not improved (p. 73).

Thus, effective capacity building means that all those who are charged with educating the nation's children and, subsequently implementing educational policies at the micro-level must be treated in ways that are commensurate with the principles of social justice. Their welfare (monetary and non-monetary) must be accorded the importance it deserves. That being said, it should be emphasized that teachers and other educationalists always have choices. They can either continue to transmit obsolete and inutile knowledge or go beyond what is mandated by the curriculum to ensure the success of all their students despite enduring challenges within the education system

Figure 1. A contextualized model of teacher capacity building



Capacity Building and Teaching and Learning Trajectories

The end result of successful capacity building initiatives should be effective and transformative teaching and learning. While transformative learning is most often associated with learners, educationists also benefit from it. Although there are different conceptions of transformative learning, one theme connects its various approaches- the idea of a profound change in consciousness or perspective in the learner (Mezirow et al., 2000; Cranton, 1994). While the nature and extent of perspective transformation varies in individuals, such a change would of necessity, involve a re-alignment of the way the learner sees the world. By awakening the interrogator in learners, transformative learning allows them to challenge entrenched assumptions as well as embrace problem-posing pedagogical approaches rather than models that treat them like information depositories without providing them opportunities to critically engage in knowledge inquiry (Freire, 1970).

A prerequisite to successful teaching and learning is teacher self-knowledge through teacher research (Egbo, 2005b). Just as research contributes to and enhances our ability to develop as society, teacher research helps teachers to better understand the *teaching-self* as well as adopt better pedagogical practices.

Understanding the teaching self involves a process of autobiographical analysis that should enable teachers, to understand how their personal histories and philosophies may intersect with their teaching practices. Palmer (1998) provides a compelling argument for teacher self-knowledge:

Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self knowledge- and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject. ..In fact, knowing my students and my subject depends heavily on self-knowledge. ... Good teaching requires self-knowledge: it is a secret hidden in plain sight (pp. 2 and 3).

Unfortunately, while teachers often ask questions regarding what to teach and how to teach it, they hardly ever strive towards self-knowledge. Ultimately, understanding the teaching-self involves becoming aware or developing critical consciousness in the sense advocated by Freire (1970) which should, in turn, result in improvements in teaching and learning for both the teacher and his or her students respectively.

Conclusion

The main thrust of the discussion in this paper is that there is a dire need for building teacher capacity in Nigeria in order to improve teacher performance and, implicitly, improve student learning and overall academic success. While teachers must strive towards excellence, providing them the tools to succeed is an essential component of their growth and development as professionals. The current situation demands immediate, radical and transformative changes to reverse the culture of student failure and systemic decline.

Nigerian policymakers should be spurred into devising important strategies that will respond to the challenges within the education system one of the most important being teacher capacity building. It is, of course, seductive to think that the most expedient approach to solving the problems within the teaching subsector is the wholesale importation of a Western model. That would, undoubtedly, be impractical and myopic. As Niyozov (2008) suggests, policy-makers in developing countries should be cautious about adopting externally developed bureaucratic approaches to addressing perceived deficiencies in teaching practices. Arguably, the current challenges within the teaching subsector in Nigeria calls for systemic eclecticism i.e. drawing on tried and tested elements of a variety of teacher capacity building models to develop a unique and contextualized model.

As a blueprint for moving forward, I have proposed a three-pronged intervention strategy for helping teachers to improve their skills, knowledge-base and competencies. This involves simultaneously providing the appropriate training (or retraining of teachers as the case may be), the provision of the necessary

resources, materials and infrastructure that will foster sustainable teacher commitment to effective teaching and learning as well as ensure the successful implementation of the nation's educational policies at the micro-level of the system.

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