

Prospects and Challenges in the Teaching of Art Education: A Nigerian Experience

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Abstract

The standard of teaching and learning of Fine Arts in Nigeria is still low compared to most developed countries across the globe. This problem has been attributed to ineffective methods and learning of art. In view of this problem it is the aim of this study to make an in-depth research of what could serve as the most effective method of art teaching, since art teachers and other stakeholders in arts are of the opinion that a lot more need to be done. In every field of study, teachers are the main vehicle through which qualitative education is delivered. Qualitative and descriptive methods were employed in the study, while sources of data include both primary and secondary sources. Through this research approach, the study attempts at outlining the trends of arguments, suggestions and the challenges facing the implementation of suggested National Curriculum content. The work reveals that the objectives of the curriculum are yet to be met and urge government, teachers and other stakeholders to work fervently towards full implementation of the National Curriculum content.

Key words: Art Education, Challenges, Curriculum Content, Teaching, Learning, Synthesis

Introduction

In Nigeria, the informal apprenticeship method of teaching and learning used to be the traditional method of producing crafts men (Artists) needed for the sustenance of the society's fabric of development. With the introduction of Western-type of formal education, and subsequently the inclusion of Fine and Applied Art into the educational system, the philosophy of western art education, content and methodology needed to be embraced holistically. This approach has proved unsuitable for teaching in Nigerian schools and also ushered in the idea of synthesizing traditional and modern art for educational consumption, in order to create a Nigerian visual art education (Okeke, 1979).

As society changes, demands and aspirations of society also change, but, to what extent has the 'Nigerian' art education curriculum succeeded in meeting the needs of the changing society? This paper attempts to answer this question, by looking at the trend of development of art education in Nigeria, and the challenges it has faced over the years.

Historical Precedence

Traditionally, before the colonial adventure into Nigeria, the informal apprenticeship method of skills acquisition was very effective in the development and continuity of the arts and culture of the society. This method taught skills development as well as cultural morality for effective participation and living in the society. Generally, the skill developed in this system was purely for producing functional objects that satisfied the physical and metaphysical needs and aspirations of society. Therefore, traditional art education was very society-oriented (Ebighbo, 2002).

The master craftsman in the traditional setting was in most cases a descendant of a long line of craftsmen or women. The method of training did not have stipulated limits, but was dependent on when the apprentice is deemed to have acquired enough skill or high level of craftsmanship to become a master on his own. There was no organized direct teaching procedure. The trainee imbibes skills basically through practice, copying or imitation, guided by the norms and aspirations of the society. Training usually takes place in the compounds of the skilled craft persons or in places selected for such training by the community. Therefore, the training was not only between the apprentice and the master, but includes the whole village or community. The apprentices' knowledge of the crafts, equips them with the aesthetic and visual qualities of the skill being learnt, because it is usually what they make use of functionally in the day-to-day living of the community. This method is still used by traditional craft persons to date, in producing items such as carvings, smiths' products, pottery, and weaving that are still practiced locally. The traditional artist had a noble position and was well respected in the society, especially where items of worship were created.

Because the work of a traditional artist was usually commissioned, he was restrained to work within demands and aesthetic dictated by his patron. The patron dictates exactly what is wanted and the artist works within the context of the client's demands. These constraints curtailed the artist's creativity, keeping it within communal traditional culture and styles, perpetuating the artistic conservativeness of traditional society. This fact however, did not mean that the traditional artist only copied or repeated the forms he had imbibed as a trainee. Wingert (1962) opined that the fundamental shapes, forms, and patterns of the artist style was fixed by tradition, yet it was evident that most of the pressures for the invention and development of new forms were self-motivated, coming from innate aesthetic desires.

The traditional artist strove to achieve a balance between traditional motifs and commissioned representations, between feelings for the objects created and their functionality, between personal creative urge and tradition, in short gave own personal expression, interpretation and insight to traditional forms, out of ingenuity as a highly perceptive and creative artist.

The traditional Nigerian art was never devoid of aesthetic embellishment despite their functionality, thus the artist had to be quite knowledgeable about the daily living experiences of the community, and as such art was rich in all essential characteristics of the society economically, politically, religiously, socially and culturally. Evidence of products and works of traditional artists attest to the effectiveness of the methodology used in imparting skills acquisition to the apprentices. The greatness of Nigeria's cultural heritage in terms of its art shows the appropriateness and functionality of the apprenticeship system.

Formal Art Education

Art education was not included in the school curricular, at the inception of western education in the early part of the 19th Century. This was because the Christian missionaries who established the schools forbade the teaching of art on the erroneous premises that it was solely for heathen religious practices. The inclusion of art education into the Nigerian school curricula in 1923 was due to the singular effort of Chief Aina Onabolu, who introduced it on part-time basis in secondary schools in Lagos, after sojourn in England where he went to study art.

Onabolu's pioneering efforts cannot be overemphasized, though method and curriculum content side tracked the functionalism for which traditional art was based on, for the benefit of professionalism and technical proficiency. His philosophy was geared towards the production of Nigerian students that can be better than the European, aiming at challenging and eradicating the derogative low concept the colonialists had of Africans. As such, the content of the new curriculum was a carbon copy of western European curricular with an art Syllabus that emphasized the then modern teaching of drawing, painting, anatomy, perspective and other supporting disciplines such as art history, education and methodology.

An appraisal of the philosophy of an educationalist such as Fafunwa (1970), stresses that the root of any curriculum is based on cultural values, then Onabolu's effort for art education in Nigeria was bound to be ineffective, (due to the lack of functionality in European art), and may not have any meaning or value for the Nigerian society, whose art products were based on the needs and aspirations of the society, and whose values for art were basically functional and utilitarian. Western art teaching emphasized the aesthetics of anatomy, colour, perspective, traditional art on the other hand emphasized functionalism primarily and aestheticism secondarily. Thus, the earlier formal art education became inadequate and inappropriate to serve the needs of societal consumption.

Emergence of Synthesis in the Art Syllabus

The new western-type art education pioneered by Onabolu, contrasted sharply with Nigerian cultural art, and this, may have been the beginning of the separation between art and life in Nigeria. In 1952, Kenneth Murray, an expatriate art teacher from United Kingdom joined the Nigeria teaching profession at the invitation of the Nigerian Director of Education. In contrast to Onabolu's philosophy, Murray saw beauty, dignity and excellence in Nigeria's indigenous art, he therefore mounted his program based on a mixture of traditional and European art, with the objective of producing students and teachers with "a balanced knowledge of art education and who would function effectively in the society" (Onuchukwu 2003). This was a more functional program of art, as it was more society oriented. Murray's expectation was short-lived, as the colonial administrators and missionaries were still anti traditional towards indigenous creative expressions. Following the introduction of western University School Certification Examinations (Oxford, then Cambridge), art was included as one of the examination subjects, with examinations items based on what obtained in Oxford and Cambridge, this led to the absolute eradication of traditional expressions from the art curricular. Thus, by the early 1960s, with the dawn of Nigeria's independence from colonial domination, the educational curriculum was saddled with contents that were clearly inappropriate for the development the country needed and deserved.

The effect of the advent of the western ideas and governance affected the conservativeness of traditional art. It is important to note here, that society has never been constant, it changes with time, it is not 'the time' per se that changes society, but the environmental experiences through the passage of time results in causal change (Wangboje, 1989). The new religion brought in by the Christian missionaries, education, and inculcation of western ideals and ideas in all their ramifications affected the position of art in the society generally. It was inevitable, since culture is the root of curriculum development, the Nigerian post-independence system of education had to reflect this synthesis of culture. With the objective of creating a unity that will serve the needs of the new generation.

Several renowned artists and educationalists such as Uche Okeke supporting the idea of synthesis in Nigerian art education, recognized the validity of both the traditional and western approaches, and agreed that Nigerian contemporary art education program for schools must reflect a synthesis of both. This, they opined, will ensure a sense of national pride and identity and solve the problem of adapting one approach over the other. Thus the national objective for post primary art education stressed the development and projection of Nigeria's art and culture, as well as world cultural heritage. It became mandatory to employ traditional artists on a part-time basis for the realization of Nigeria's goals of art education, aimed at establishing an art education program that is inclusive of traditional art and culture.

A cursory look at the art syllabus in Nigeria's National Education Curriculum, clearly shows a synthesis of both traditional and western approaches in teaching historical concepts of both. However, it will be agreed that the methodological approach in terms of instruction are all based on western values. The western approach discourages the traditional method of developing skills through watching the master and copying – true this may inhibit creativity, but if synthesis is to take place, then traditional techniques need to be imbibed also, alongside the western approach of motivation to

enhance and develop creativity. So that students can use the knowledge of both, to serve the society in which they live.

Graduates of Art education within the last 30 to 40 years are all products of this “synthesis” curriculum of Nigeria’s art education, the emphasis received from this education, was more western oriented. In as much as, individual attempts are made by some to synthesize, a lot is still left to be done. Most Art graduates, do not possess indigenous skills. In kano (a city known for its amazing leather works, indigo dyeing and raffia mat weaving), graduate students of Fine and Applied Arts from the Colleges of Education in and around the city, hardly have any knowledge of these skills. How then can the system contribute to the up keep of Nigeria’s cultural heritages as enshrined in the policy of education? Yet, the same students graduate with knowledge of western dyeing techniques, yes – they create good paintings and designs. It is believed that others too have severally called for research into our locally sourced art materials, (this is the duty of Universities and Research Institutes). However, this is not likely to happen. Because art is believed by a majority of the populace not to be of much importance, it is erroneously viewed as a discipline that is non-intellectual, non-academic, not honorable, a waste of time, and that anyone can do art. This is the true place of art in the Nigerian society and in Nigeria’s educational system. This is the core of the Problem in Nigeria.

Till date, traditional artists are still not employed on part-time basis in junior secondary schools, and in fact other institutions, to cater for the “development and projection of Nigeria’s art and culture”. Schools, private or government owned, hardly take students for educational tours to museums, historical locations, gatherings, exhibitions, art workshops in their respective locations.

Art is a Core subject at the Junior Secondary School level only even so, there are no adequate and qualified art teachers, as well as the necessary facilities, equipment and materials to teach the subject. A Spade should indeed be called a Spade. The Policy of the national curriculum on art education is laudable. But the fact still remains that they are just policies on paper, which cannot implement itself. The bane of the problem is that society is changing, but no changes in the attitudes of stakeholders towards implementation of the programmes.

The problem is not with financing of education but rather the ignorance on the part of administrators who see art as a non-academic subject devoid of any benefits and is non progressive. This is aside of the corrupt cancerous practices of misappropriation of funds carried out by some.

The government also has a weak, inefficient inspectorial culture which does not monitor the implementation of policies it has invested so much money on. On the part of teachers of art education in all its spheres, lack of interest, probably borne out of the effect of societal attitude towards art, has resulted to the lackadaisical attitude being showcased by a majority of art teachers. It is true that material resources may be scarce, but a creative teacher whose student’s interest is paramount, will always find a way to improvise. Additionally, art teachers have become zero-level in innovation, still using the same methodology taught by the colonial masters, where has creativity gone to? Generally, art teachers have become less concerned with creating art or publishing, which has led to non-exhibitions of works or discuss by artists. Artists now produce works borne out of the need for personal self-expression, when art was a vehicle for communication, the voice of the people. A majority of artists have forgotten the manifold benefits of art exhibitions- expression of oneself, viable means of financial aggrandizement, a challenge to the imagination to be more creative, discovering more techniques and materials etc. In the introduction the writter mentioned that a good teacher can do much to redeem a bad system, and a good system can be damaged by a bad teacher. It is time the people ask themselves individually, which they want to be tagged with.

Finally, the wanton misappropriation of funding meant for development and continuity of art programmes in educational institutions by art teachers, heads of art departments and administrators (where funding is made available) is becoming appalling by the day and is detrimental to the growth of art in Nigeria’s educational system. One must venture into the area of the students when discussing the problems challenging art education in Nigeria. To start with, the trend in recent times on admission

exercise of students for the art education programme in most institutions, especially Colleges of Education is most appalling. The programme has turned out to be the trashcan of the F9's, 2 passes (viz: failed all 9 subjects, or has only 2 passes at the SSCE level). As an art lecturer in a college of education for more than 25years, the writer has encountered students who could not really understand nor speak English (English is the lingua franca in Nigeria's educational institutions). One wonders how these students wrote their SSCE or NECO examination.

Art is a universal language in the studio sense, however disciplines such as Art education, Art History, Entrepreneurship education and other theory courses are not given any considerations when students are given admission to study art. There are myriads of more problems, but suffice it to say that these amongst others are some of the contemporary trends and challenges being faced by art education in Nigeria.

Recommendations

There are several approaches that can be used to tackle the discussed challenges of art education in Nigeria, which may/or may not be effective, depending on the seriousness and diligence of the individuals that will implement these suggestions. Because the nonchalant attitude of government workers in general, leaves a lot to be desired. On the part of government, the policies are already in blue print, implementation must be carried out through the following ways:

- i. Financing and organizing workshops for art teachers through federal and state ministries of education, during the long vacation breaks. This will be in the form of studio courses, with the intent of renewing the artist in them. These courses could culminate into shows in museums and galleries located within the vicinity of the workshop venues. Professional growth and development is enhanced through participation in events and special projects. Mini-conferences can be included to discuss contemporary issues in art education that are based on changes in the society. Senior students from higher institutions can be participants in such forums, since they will be preparing to be part of the work force in the community/society.
- ii. Government should make it mandatory to have local artists on part-time basis in schools at all levels.
- iii. Government through its appropriate agencies must bolster educational inspection. This exercise should be a continuous process, so that any art teacher found wanting will be weeded out of the system based on the theory that a bad teacher can damage a good system. The inspectorial body terms of reference will also include the inspection of facilities and materials, methodologies employed, staffing projects and works of students etc.
- iv. The art teacher should constantly bear in mind that teaching art is not only instructing the students, it also means teaching effective visual communication with aesthetic intent. It requires that teachers and their students engage in observation, imagination, problem solving, reflective and critical thinking, and decision making as well as developing appropriate techniques for using a variety of art materials. Art teachers should realize that using art materials is not equivalent to making art. So the art teacher must explore ways to motivate the students, note that while teaching, one is also learning that is the beauty of art. A student may have the potential, but without motivation, it is not worth anything.
- v. In some developed countries, there is what is called student evaluation of faculty staff. May be it is time, this is introduced into the education sector in Nigeria.

- vi. Any artist that wants to be an art teacher must be equipped with a teaching certificate. It may be necessary to make methodology a compulsory course for all art students in Nigerian Universities and Polytechnics.
- vii. Different roles in art have been argued overtime, viz artist create, art historians describes, art critics explicate, and art educators do it all. Therefore, in a situation where any graduate of art can be employed to teach, then all artists need to be armed with methodology of art teaching. Because lack of teaching qualification of art teachers has led to the production of graduates that are non-creative, non-innovative and have the least interest in art.
- viii. Lastly, a candidate who did not offer art as an examination subject at the SSCE, NECO level must not be given admission to study art at the higher level. All students should go through an oral English interview as well as studio test at college or departmental level before registration.

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