EFFECTIVE CHARACTER EDUCATION FOR UNDERGRADUATES STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF BENIN.

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Abstract

The study assessed undergraduate students' perception of university approach to students' character education. Qualitative research method that adopted focus group discussion was the design of the study. The respondents were drawn from the Faculty of Education University of , from year one to four. The instrument was a questionnaire titled; Students' Opinion on the University Character Education Scheme (SOUCES). It was made of up of six basic questions. Members of each group responded to each of the questions during the interactive session. The different responses were collated by a member of the research team who acted as the secretary to the different focus groups. The findings of the study revealed that students accepted the need to improve on students' character through functional character education programme at the university level. It was recommended among others that the counsellors through the university counselling unit should embark on sensitization programme and periodic orientation and seminars to create awareness on the importance of cultivating good character.
Key words: *Character training, Students , University.*

Introduction:

Character training is prime to the life of every individual. The university authority emphasizes it at every convocation ceremony that "the following graduates have been trained in character and in learning" while awarding the certificates. This implies that the university through some intentional proactive effort has imbued in the students some universal and important ethical values. Thus, University education focuses on both character and intellectual (academic) training. Nevertheless, the Nigerian School system (including the tertiary institutions) appears to be witnessing in the last three decades an unprecedented increase in the rate of violent, anti-social and unethical practices among students. This has reached an alarming proportion with its attendant effects. At the lower educational levels (primary and secondary), teachers appear to have relinquished the role of character building in students owing to the intimidation of some parents. Besides, after the Federal Government took over Mission Schools in 1973, character education (moral instruction) was excluded from the curriculum. Yet, education is meant to address the holistic growth and development of every student. Thompson (2002) asserts that education has two primary goals; to educate people intellectually and to teach them to be morally good. Similarly, the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates says that the goals of education are to make children both saints and good. The issue therefore is how education can contribute to students' character formation in order to prepare them to be good citizens at home, school and the larger society.

The term 'character' as an English word is derived from the Greek word "Charakter" that literally mean a mark impressed on a "coin" or meter. It refers to an indelible mark of consistency and predictability. It is an enduring dispositional tendency in behaviour which is deeply rooted in one's personality that integrates behaviour, attitude and values (Hay, Castle, Stimson & Davies, 1995). The later interpretation depicts a distinctive mark that distinguishes one thing from another. Thus, an individual's character is his/her distinctive mark that differentiates him/her from others. Pala (2011) sees it as the disposition and habits which determine the manner one responds to desires, challenges, fear, failure and success. It is described in relation to people's moral judgment and worthiness. Character is assessed on the premise of students' conduct. The overall conduct of students in school reflects a concern for character which Wynne (1988) posits should be "interwoven throughout the school programme" (P.426). Thus, Apple and Beans (as cited in Thompson, 2002) assert that students learn values, morals ethics and character through the normal realities of their daily lives in schools. Similarly, Alutu (2010) noted that a major objective of education is to impart knowledge and cultural values that will make individuals think rationally and effectively and interact adequately with society. This is central to character education.

Character education according to Pala (2011) is the intentional proactive effort by schools, institutions, districts and states to instill in their students important core ethical values like fairness, responsibility and respect for self and others. In other words it is the deliberate effort to develop virtues that are good for the individuals and good for the society (Lickona, 1992). It needs a deliberate effort to cultivate virtues. This is predicated on the fact that children do not leave for school with the intention of cultivating school culture which Pala (2011) identifies to include; moral education, positive youth development, civic education, social emotional learning and service learning. These offer the holistic development of the young people and help them become caring, responsible and patriotic citizens. Thus, character education centres round ethics as it attempts to promote the development of positive traits in students as ethical human beings. Thus, character education is conceived as a systematic approach which requires identification of each student's strengths and weaknesses. Turansky (2015) identified six step plan to identify, analyse and strategise for positive behavioural change and character development in each student. They are; 1. Observation- recognize the problem, 2. Diagnosis- name the character weakness, 3. Solution- name and define each solution, 4. Treatment- provide instruction for working on the solution identified, 5. Motivation- inspire change and 6. Follow-up – continue to work on solutions till change in character weakness in observed.

The idea of developing character in students is a perennial and global issue. Ancient Greek philosophers; Socrates, Plato and Aristotle discussed the pursuit of virtue and goodness at length. Gecan and Mulholland-Glaze in Troutman (2014) assets that Socrates and John Dewey strongly believe that the passing on of moral traditions is imperative and a part of school duty. In recognition of this, the goals of Education in Nigeria as encapsulated in the National Policy of Education (FRN, 2013) among others is to "produce scholars who are morally sound, patriotic and effective citizens" (P.2) and capable of making responsible decision and wise judgment (Kinkopf & Casey, 2016).

The emphasis on character education in Nigeria was rekindled at the beginning of the early 1990s as an attempt to address the rising rate of violent and anti-social behaviours among students. The unhealthy behavours have been associated with little or no attention given to character education which is fundamentally an ethical concept. The United states Department of Education (2005) conceives character education as an explicit learning process from which students in schools understand, accept and act on ethical values such as respect for others, justices, civic, virtue, citizenship and responsibility for self and others. It refers to activities which can assist to develop and improve students' behaviour. Such would be incorporated into the regular curriculum or would be separated or interwoven with other subjects. Hence, Hoge as citied (in Agboola and Tsai, 2012) see character education it as a way of adjusting the behaviour of the students in order to become good citizens of the future. Nevertheless, it is not a quick fix of deviated behaviours of students as students' character is influenced by factors like family, social and cultural environments and values which are outside the school or educational settings. Thus, Otten as cited in Larson (2009) says that;

> *Character education is an umbrella term used to describe many aspects of teaching and learning for personal development. Some areas under this umbrella are moral reason/cognitive development, social and emotional learning, moral education/virtue life skills education, caring community, heath education, violence prevention conflict resolution/ peer mediation and ethnical/moral philosophy p.9.*

This implies that character education is not about controlling students' behaviour rather it is an integrated process for educating the child in a healthy and caring environment. It is about teaching students to imbibe good traits that will help them get along well with others in the society. Therefore, character education emphasizes among others the qualities of honesty or trustworthiness, respect for self and others, fairness, responsibility, caring and citizenship. These are considered as the six pillars of character, while others are perseverance, courage, self-discipline, integrity and patriotism.

The questions that come to mind are; to what extent are students found exhibiting the above ethical qualities? Do the University's academic programmes accommodate character education in their curriculum? The observed behaviour of undergraduate students in Nigeria Universities suggests that less emphasis is on the ethical values of students and so the institutions appear to be more secular and neglects the teaching of basic morals which are one of the contributing factors of our current society's problems. In other words, character education should not be limited to the primary and secondary school levels, but should be imperative at the tertiary school level. Thus, Novianti (2017) asserts that the continuation of character education in higher education is necessary in order to preserve and strengthen the character that has been shaped in the previous levels of education. The principal idea of character education is to improve the behaviour and attitude of students. It is predicated on the application of social – emotional and character development with the emphasis on teaching, practicing, and modeling essential personal and civic life habits that are almost universally understood as making people good human beings (Character Education, 2010 p.48, in Chapman, 2011). The attention on character education appears to have gained renewed recognition because of the increasing and growing tendency of negative behavour among students.

Statement of the Problem

The 21st Century school system in Nigeria appears to be witnessing a growing involvement of students in lax attitudes, dishonesty and lack of respect for others and their property and near lack of conscience or remorse. In pursuant of globalization drive of acquiring and applying scientific knowledge for global compliance, current school teachers appear to focus and emphasize the cognitive development of students to the detriment of their affective development. Yet, education in the course of history has two principal goals, to educate people intellectually and to teach them to be morally good. In spite of the globalization drive of the 21st century, there is need to emphasize character education with attention on core values which transcends cultural and political limits. The core values include honesty, respect, fairness, integrity and responsibility. The lack of these qualities in most students is traceable to the absent of character education. However, not everyone believes that character education is the solution to the societal ills of today's youth, since it goes beyond giving instruction on moral which will not necessarily change a student's behaviour. Yet, Apple and Beane in Thompson (2002) assert that students learn values, morals, ethics and character through the normal realities of their daily lives in schools. So character education is imperative to assist the moral fibers that appear to have been torn in the youth as the media is full unethical features.

Within the education sector, lack of character education or training led to students' involvement in cheating, getting into fights, breaking the law, bullying showing disrespect, vandalism, increase in drug/alcohol abuse and even low academic achievement. Most studies on this issue have focused on primary and secondary school students as contained in the studies of Harney (2014); Agbola and Tsai (cited in Novianti, 2017), thus leaving a gap in literature on studies of University students.

Relevance of the study

The study is meant to assess the level of character education in the university system with university of Benin as a reference. It is to establish the existence or otherwise of students' conduct as part of the training progrmame of the undergraduate students. This is anchored on the assumption that educating the mind and promoting ethical values will produce individuals who are holistically developed. Thus, the aim is to assist students to develop important human qualities which encourage patriotism in the development of the nation. So, the goals of education as expressed in the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2013), "the development of the individual into a morally sound, patriotic and effective citizen who contributes positively to the society would have been achieved. The National Policy on Counselling launched in 2018 reiterate the need to train students to acquire all round development (NPC, 2018).

Methodology

The study adopted a focus group discussion approach which is an aspect of qualitative research method. The researchers met with randomly selected students of 100 to 400 levels in the Faculty of Education who indicated interest in participating in the study. The responses of the respondents were obtained through the questionnaire titled; students' opinion on the university Character Education Scheme. (SOUCES). The respondents were both male and female students between the ages of 17 to 25 years. The instrument consisted of six basic questions which the students responded individually

to in the group encounter with the research team. There was a secretary from the research team that harnessed the responses of the respondents in each of the groups for the purpose of coherency.

Presentation of qualitative analysis group responses

Question One: What is your understanding of the term 'character'?

In response to this question the focus group one (100 level students) perceived character as an attitude someone exhibits towards other people around him/her. It depicts someone's behaviour which can either be social or anti-social that differentiates him/her from other people around him. Similarly, focus group two (200 level students) perceived character as the strength of one's morality that distinguishes one person from another. Thus, it is an attribute a person is known for. The focus group three (300 level students) perceived character as the projection a person displays of him/herself towards life in general. While the group four (400 level students) described character as a person's approach to situation. Thus, character is an expression of what an individual is in relation to people, events and life circumstances.

Question two: What are the behaviours that connote poor or bad character?

In response to this question, the focus group respondents identified cheating (e.g. examination malpractice), dishonesty, stealing bullying, lying, being saucy among others, while focus groups two and three identified rudeness, arrogance, negative view to life and unabated or uncontrollable anger and the focus group four identified impersonation, smoking, laziness and procrastination among others.

Question three: What are the behaviours that connote good character?

The focus group one in response to this question identified modesty, tolerance, patience, generosity and respect for self and others. The focus groups two, three and four ideas were not quite different but included politeness, cheerfulness, calmness, humanity and self-control discipline and hard work.

Question Four: How does a student imbibe good character?

The first (100 level students) focus group identified the cultivation of good character through religious teachings, parents'/teachers guidance and school disciplinary approaches. The second focus group (200 level students) identified positive social activities through religious doctrine and organization while the third focus groups three and four (300 and 400 level students) opined that good character can be cultivated through a personal resolve that is geared towards maintaining good habit and morals.

Question five: How does one develop character?

In response to this question, the first focus group identified character training through interaction at home, encounter in school, community and religious gathering. The responses of the second, third and fourth focus groups were not quite different. They however, added that through encounter with friends, listening and watching others (modeling) good character can be cultivated.

Question six: How will the university be involved in students' character training?

In response to this question, the focus group one is of the opinion that good learning environment in the University will enhance good character training in the students. Besides, mentorship of students by lecturers of good and proven character can enhance good characters in the university undergraduate students. The focus group two posited the inclusion courses on good character formation in the school curriculum and be made compulsory for all students at all levels. Moreso, character formation can be enhanced if the university should emphasize and adhere strictly to students' observance of the university code of conduct. The third and fourth focus groups are of the opinion that the university can enhance character training in the students through periodic orientation programme and interactive sessions where students will be obliged to express themselves. The group also believes that the provision of good halls of residence will enhance character training in the students.

Discussion of findings

To the first question on what is character? The respondents of this study understood character to imply attributes expressed in human behaviour/conduct that distinguishes one person from another. This reflects the assertion of Hay, Stimson and Davies (1995) and Pala (2011) that character is an enduring dispositional tendency in human behavior. This suggests that the respondents of this study have a clear knowledge of what character is. Since character is closely associated with one's attributes, it suggests that it is partly inherent and partly influenced by external factors like physical and psychological environments. Thus, the relevance of the school in the character training of students.

To the questions on the exhibition of good and bad character, the respondents identified modesty, tolerance, respect for self and others, honesty, humility among others as expression of good character. They however, identified cheating, stealing, bullying, lying, dishonesty among others as expressions of bad character. This corroborates the assertion of United States Department of Education (2005) that character education is imminent for ethical values like respect for self and others, good citizenship with responsibility for self and others. This suggests that students' involvement in some activities that portrays bad character is not borne out of ignorance of the knowledge of is right.

To the question; how does one develop and imbibes good character, the respondents identified the cultivation of good character through moral instruction (religious teachings), parents' and teachers' guidance. The emphasis on religious doctrine, community and school in the training/formation of character of students cut across all the focus groups in this study. The school refers to the education system where children primarily learn some values. This confirms the assertion of Thompson (2002); Otten as cited in Lason (2009); Gecan and Mulholland – Glaze (cited in Troutman 2014) that character training/education is all encompassing as it is imperative and part of school duty to principally train people intellectually and to teach them to be morally good. Besides, the respondents of this study strongly believe in the influence of parents and the community where the individual lives. This can be attributed to the cultural background of the students or respondents of this study. Parents and community members in Nigeria like some other African countries form a strong alliance

and synergy in ensuring the good conduct of everyone in the environ. Some misconduct often attract some harsh sanctions from the community leaders, through such, children are taught the value of good conduct and bad traits are discouraged. However, character is built or developed overtime, hence the need to start early. We need counseling and guidance to complement the training at home by parents and guardians.

To the question; how the university will be involved in the students' character training; the different focus groups identified good and conducive learning environment and lecturers' /students' mentorship scheme. Some suggested the introduction of compulsory courses on good character formation for all undergraduate students at all levels. Besides, the respondents opined that through periodic orientation programme and interactive sessions the university can meaningfully address the issue of character training of the undergraduate students. This confirms the assertion of Pala (2011) and Novianti (2017) that character education as an intentional proactive effort by schools, and institutions should continue at the tertiary levels (higher education) in order to preserve and strengthen what has been formed at the previous levels of education. This implies that character education is imperative and necessary at the university level. The assertion of the respondents of this study suggested that character education is desirous for the proper achievement of the goals of Education in Nigeria as contained in the Nigerian Policy on Education (FRN, 2013); which is to produce scholars who are morally sound, patriotic and effective citizens.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it was concluded that character education is imperative at all levels of education including the universities. It can be made effective through periodic orientation programmes, seminars and lecturers/students mentorship. Thus the primary goals of education which is to educate people intellectually and teach them to be morally good would be achieved. Character education should be integrated in the equipped official school curriculum especially at the first year to train students in character and learning.

Implications for Counselling and Recommendations

The findings of this study imply that the undergraduate students consented to the importance of character training. Their suggestion of compulsory introduction of courses on character training at all levels speaks volume. It implies the acceptance of poor display of ideal/good character among them. This has direct bearing on the counsellors and the university's counselling unit. It beckons on their attention for an improved character formation among the undergraduate students. Thus, the counsellors through the university counselling unit can embark on sensitization programme through the different halls of residence, lecture halls, library and other legal and approved statutory students gatherings. Besides periodic orientation programmes, seminars and symposia are desirous at all levels but differently to create more awareness and importance of imbibing good character. Thus emphasis can be laid on some salient aspects which are imminent for good conduct in school and geared towards achieving the primary aim of education as encapsulated in the National Policy on Education.

The students also suggested that lecturers-students mentorship has a lot of implications for the teaching staff. It implies that the students have faith in the some lecturers' ability to positively improve/enhance their behaviour through their own conduct. For uniformity, the lecturers should have an organized seminar or symposium on mentorship. Such will assist them to interact and operates within the conventional limit that will not be counter productive. Thus, the university, administration could assign students to the different lecturers for mentorship through the different Deans and Head of Departments. Periodically, the lecturers and students can have a general forum but in sub groups to assess and give feedback on the mentorship scheme. This would likely improve the character training of undergraduate students in our universities.

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