
PROMOTING BEST PRACTICES IN CIVIC/ LAW-RELATED EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHERS IN NIGERIA

OLUBELA, Afolabi
OGUNSANYA, Adeola

*Department of Arts & Social Sciences Education (ASSED),
Faculty of Education,
Olabisi Onabanjo University,
Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State*

and

AYANWALE, Olukunle

*Department of Social Studies,
Emmanuel Alayande College of Education,
Oyo, Oyo State*

Abstract

Education is the core pyramid of modern-day development. Teachers severally play a pivotal role in the educational development of any nation and society. While civic/law-related education aims at producing thoughtful, well-informed and responsible citizens, it is the duty of the teachers to disseminate information, facilitate knowledge and inculcate skills of civic participation, decision making, and critical thinking, in the students. The roles of Social Studies teachers in promoting best practices in civic/law-related education cannot be over-emphasized. As such, the paper discussed the best practices and the roles of social studies teachers in promoting the best practices in the school system. Today, teachers must be leaders of discussions and facilitators of debates. They must provide an atmosphere of openness, trust, and honesty. Instructional methods that provide opportunities for students to apply civic

knowledge, skills, and attitudes toward real-life situations are important, and must be employed in teaching.

Keywords: Civic/Law-related Education, Social Studies Teachers, Best practices/teaching pedagogies

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Introduction

Education is a veritable instrument of social progress without which no nation nor individual can attain professionalism. (Ughamadu, 2006). Education is the key to participation in the highly competitive global economy of the 21st century based on technological revolution, communication and transfer of information as well as major changes in production, transport and distribution and the economic value of knowledge. Thus, to say education remains the core pyramid of modern-day development is not an over-statement. Education has always reflected in and has been influenced by changes in economy and society, and at the same time, acting upon those changes. The binding relationship between education, economy and society is interactive. Teachers play a pivotal role in the educational development of any nation and society (Olubela, 2001).

Realizing the importance of education, Balogun (2003) asserted that there is no nation that can grow beyond the quality of its education. Education is regarded as the main instrument for social, political and economic development of any nation (Talah, 2002). Thus, the strength, security and well being of Nigeria rest squarely on the quality of education provided for its citizens. It will continue to be a great asset to many as well as a steady source of manpower for the national economy. Good teachers are always optimistic about what their pupils/students can achieve, regardless of their background or circumstances. Based on their experience on the job, teachers know how pupils/students respond to success. Teachers understand that all their students are capable of significant progress and that their potential for learning is unlimited.

Teachers are one of the most influential professionals in the society (Iyamu and Otote, 2005). In their day-to-day work, teachers can and do make huge differences to students' lives, directly, through the curriculum they teach and indirectly, through their behaviour,

attitudes, values, relationships with and interest in students. If there is any profession that is most central to the attainment of social goals, it is teaching. The teacher mediates all educational innovations and translates them into actions before the objectives of such innovations can be fully attained. Little wonder the declaration by the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) in the National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004) that the quality of the teacher determines the extent to which the nation can grow.

Teachers, at all levels of educational system, facilitate knowledge and the required skills and values in students (Omatseye, 1999). Hence, the overall success of Law Related Education (LRE) depends largely on teachers' contributions. Essential LRE knowledge includes: civil, criminal, administrative and constitutional themes; practical information about the law and public policy; and concepts underlying a constitutional democracy. Basic to LRE skills are critical thinking, decision-making, problem solving, communication, cooperation, reasoning and participation. These knowledge and skills cannot be attained without the efforts of the school teachers, in this case, the Social Studies teachers. LRE is capable of providing students with practical legal information and practice in skills that will nurture critical thinking and civic participation (Talah, 2002).

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 1994) stipulated that the focus of Social Studies teachers should be on promotion of essential knowledge and skills in Civic/Law Related Education. Social studies teachers are to share outcomes with students, draw on their existing knowledge and strengths, give them appropriate time to answer questions, and give students multiple opportunities to practice skills, and involve as many students as possible in all aspects of the class activities. Omoyemi (1999) had earlier advised that Social Studies teachers should also make judicious selection and presentation of issues and materials. Controversial issues can also be presented as to motivate students' interest and broaden their understanding and tolerance. As such, Social Studies classes must foster opportunities to allow young people to safely voice their viewpoints; keep in mind that debate and a free flow of ideas are crucial elements of effective civic participation, and that many times there is not one correct answer. The foregoing is an attestation of the imperativeness of Social Studies

teachers in the promotion of best practices in LRE.

The Problem Statement

Changes are expected in the techniques and strategies that teachers use in the Social Studies classroom; in order to promote knowledge and skills in Civic/Law Related Education. Lannert (2001) observed that past teaching practices in most classes generally have been characterised by teachers giving lectures, explaining material, and demonstrating experiments as students take a passive role by listening, taking notes, and learning the content of subject areas. However, arising from the changes in the world at large and the complexity of human needs and challenges, teachers must assume a new pedagogical role. Social Studies classrooms must be organized in such manners that students can develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills so that they will be able to make informed decisions (Halasz, Garami, Havas, and Vago, 2001). Consequent upon this, therefore, the concern of this paper is to provide insights and answers to the following questions: What is the concept and goal of Law-Related Education (LRE)? What are best practices in Law-Related Education (LRE)? What roles could Social Studies teachers play in promoting these best practices?

Concept and Goals of Law-Related Education (LRE)

The Center for Civic Education (1995) in Law-Related Education Act of 1978 defined Law-Related Education (LRE) as “education to equip non-lawyers with knowledge and skills pertaining to the law, the legal process, and the legal system, and the fundamental principles and values on which these are based.” LRE teaches essential concepts of democracy, including law, power, justice, liberty and equality, and the relationship of these concepts to the functioning of politics, culture, and society. Additionally, the American Bar Association (ABA, 1995) stated that LRE “strives to develop the active citizens our society requires” by fostering the knowledge, skills, and values youths need to function effectively in our society. Meanwhile, law-related education is an educational programme for citizenship in a constitutional democracy. It is designed to teach the youths the fundamental principles and skills needed to become responsible participants. Law-related education teaches citizens about the law, the legal process and the fundamental principles of democracy. It gives

individuals an understanding of the complex legal system and the ability to contribute to society as thoughtful, well-informed citizens.

The goals of law-related education are to:

- i. Demystify the law and legal proceedings
- ii. Provide a balanced view of the law
- iii. Develop critical-thinking abilities
- iv. Prevent delinquent behaviour
- v. Increase interaction with members of the legal community
- vi. Teach youths their rights and responsibilities under the law.

The effectiveness of LRE programmes depends upon the knowledge and skill of teachers handling the course. In addition, positive attitudes about LRE on the part of teachers and their colleagues is very important for successful implementation of LRE in a school. Iyamu and Otote (2005) asserted that the development of necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes among teachers can be achieved through systematic and extensive staff development activities. Interaction with a variety of adult role models who work within the legal system adds credibility and reality to the curriculum and is a powerful influence on development of positive student attitudes toward the law. Appropriate use of resource persons in the classroom (e.g., lawyers, judges, police officers, legislators, etc.) is strongly associated with increased students' interest in LRE, positive responses to teachers and the school, and shifts from delinquent to non-delinquent peer associations.

In the same vein, Ross & Ross (1989) explained that these adult role models should exhibit behaviours sought in youths and be prepared in advance to make contributions to the course that are consistent with the objectives of LRE. Olubela (2001) reiterated that a key to successful implementation of LRE in schools is strong support by administrators, especially the school principal. Supportive administrators can aid LRE by organizing opportunities for peer support, rewarding teachers for outstanding work, helping teachers explain and justify the LRE programme to people in the community outside the school, and providing opportunities for staff development in knowledge and skills

needed to carry out LRE programmes. It is difficult or impossible to establish a worthwhile LRE programme in the face of indifference or opposition by important school administrators.

Suggested best practices in Law-Related Education (LRE)

The Center for Civic Education (1995) identified key elements of civic/law-related education programmes. These key elements form the basis for the best practices in Law-Related Education (LRE) in most countries of the world. The following practices have potentials to produce very thoughtful, well-informed citizens In the Nigerian students:

1. **Deliberate focus on civic/law-related students' outcomes:** In order to achieve outcomes related to greater students' engagement in civic and political life, teachers must explicitly emphasize these outcomes as part of their teaching. Such outcomes include students' propensity to vote, to work on local problems, to join voluntary associations, and to follow the news. Teachers should explicitly encourage students to be civically and politically engaged (Esfondari, 1998).
2. **Focus on essential civic/law-related knowledge and skills:** This knowledge includes legal literacy focusing on civil, criminal, and constitutional themes; practical information about the law and public policy; and concepts underlying constitutional democracy. LRE skills include critical thinking (e.g., decision making, problem solving) and social participation (e.g., communication, cooperation, and empathy). All other aspects of practice must be linked to the essential LRE knowledge and skills targeted as outcomes (Brody, 1994).
3. **Judicious selection and presentation of issues and materials:** Materials should be selected so that they provide a balanced view of the judicial system and other aspects of the political system. Controversy is also important, as it motivates students' interest. Finally, treatment of legal and constitutional issues should be characterized by indepth analysis (Falade, 1999).
4. **Sufficient quantity of instruction:** Sufficient time and space should be given to LRE in the school syllabus. Programmes that begin early in a student's school career and provide ongoing reinforcement are more likely to be effective than programmes

where civic/law-related education is concentrated in one course. (Ross & Ross, 1989)

5. Use of active teaching strategies, particularly strategies that foster true student interaction and provide opportunities to share and develop respect for different points of view: Two key teaching approaches recommended as best practices are open and balanced classroom discussion of current controversial issues and participation in simulated democratic processes, which give the school curriculum a “real-life” connection. Other characteristics of sound instruction (sharing objectives with students, drawing on students’ existing knowledge and linking that knowledge to new information, multiple opportunities to practice skills, etc.) are also important (Turner, 1994).
6. Repeated opportunities for students to interact with community resource persons who have been well-prepared for constructive interaction with students: The content presented by resource persons should be integrated with course content and the principal mode of visitors’ activities should involve interaction with students. Connections to the community can also be provided through service learning, which, when it deliberately addresses civic outcomes and links to the curriculum, can contribute to development of engaged citizens (Buzzell, 1992).
7. Active involvement of administrators: Administrators are involved in providing classroom resources, facilitating field experiences, and dealing with concerns voiced by other teachers or members of the community. Involvement of administrators is also key to helping students understand how their schools are governed and how they can have input in school governance. In addition, administrative support is critical in ensuring that civic education programmes are designed for all students, especially those who might otherwise be disengaged (Johnson & Hunter, 1997).
8. Professional development and support networks for teachers: Professional development in which teachers have a voice is also critical to successful civic/law-related education. Research has identified characteristics of successful professional development programmes, including content focus, active learning, adequate

duration, collective participation, promoting coherence, and appropriate form to provide the previous characteristics. Collaboration and networking make the challenging work of civic/law-related education easier for teachers (Offor, 1998).

Roles of Social Studies Teachers in Promoting Best Practices in the teaching and learning of LRE

Nduka (2004) opined that certain activities have the potentials for helping students become more competent and responsible citizens. Duty demands Social Studies teachers to provide these activities as requisites for best practices in Civic/Law-Related Education in schools. The roles of teachers in promoting the aforementioned practices are to provide instruction in government, history, law, and democracy. Teachers are to incorporate discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events into the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives. Also, teachers should design and implement programmes that provide students with the opportunity to apply what they learn through performing community service that is linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction. Teachers are to offer extracurricular activities that provide students the opportunity to get involved in their schools or communities. Teachers should also encourage student participation in school governance, and encourage student participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures.

Furthermore, using Hawkins' model, social studies teachers' roles in promoting these best practices also involve providing opportunities, developing skills in students and recognizing students' roles, as stakeholders in LRE such include:

1. Teachers should provide opportunities:
Students must be provided with opportunities to contribute to their family, their school, their community. The task is to provide students with meaningful, challenging, developmentally appropriate opportunities that help them feel responsible and significant (Hawkins, 1992). Hawkins and other researchers have demonstrated that instructional methods emphasising proactive classroom management, interactive teaching, and cooperative learning improved bonding to school and reduced misbehaviour. (Hawkins, 1988). Law-related education's

emphasis on interactive and cooperative-learning strategies provides an opportunity for all students to participate and to receive recognition for their contributions to the group. LRE content prepares students for school and community participation by providing an understanding of how the system works and opportunities for students to explore alternative forms of influencing social conditions. The relevance of many LRE lessons has been demonstrated to engage students' interest and willingness to participate. Several LRE curriculums are explicitly designed to promote community service and to engage students in solving real problems in their school or community.

2. Teachers should develop skills in students:

Opportunities for involvement will be of little value if students lack the skills that will enable them to participate. If students do not have the skills necessary to be successful, they experience frustration and failure and will not want to participate. Participation in mock trials, legislative hearings, and other LRE role-plays and simulations enhances communication skills. Debates, moot courts, case studies, and conflict resolution activities help students to see issues from multi-perspectives, to tolerate ambiguities, to identify alternative solutions to problems, and to assess the consequences of various alternatives. Practice in such activities strengthens the ability to think abstractly, reflectively, critically, and flexibly which in turn, may increase impulse control - the likelihood that students enrolled in LRE classes will think before acting. Practice in handling controversial issues with respect for differing views reinforces feelings of empathy and caring. Several LRE curriculums focus on the development of students plans to address relevant school and community issues, thereby providing practice in the planning skills which are among the attributes of resilient students.

3. Teachers should recognise students' roles:

Families, teachers, and members of the community who acknowledge the legitimacy and value of youth participation reinforce important messages about efficacy and personal empowerment. Students must be recognized and acknowledged for their efforts. Recognition gives students the incentive to continue to contribute. Teachers who reinforce students' progress and parents who recognize their students' efforts contribute to bonding (Hawkins, 1992).

Conclusion

Law-related education provides young people with knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for informed, responsible participation in a nation. LRE clearly and indisputably increases youths' knowledge of the justice system, government, and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in a constitutional democracy. It is the roles of Social Studies teachers to develop skills of civic participation, decision making, and critical thinking in the students.

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