

Producing effective teachers using Open and Distant Education (ODE): A case study of National Teachers' Institute (NTI) graduates in Nigeria

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Abstract

The preliminary findings of a study on identifying effective teachers (EDOREN; 2016) showed that a good number of the teachers identified as effective were produced through Open and Distance Education (ODE) also known as Open and Distance Learning (ODL) from National Teachers' Institute (NTI). This study builds on the previous study to investigate and document research evidence of the specific things or aspect of their ODL training that made them effective. The study was qualitative, 20 teachers were selected from 20 primary schools in Kaduna state, Northern Nigeria, In depth interviews were held with all the participants and the findings of the study were analyzed using IPA to examine live experience of participants. The study looked at the curriculum and teaching methodology, capacity of facilitators, other resources/facilities/infrastructure, Types of trainees, Quantity of student, Teaching practice, record keeping and monitoring of students' progress and strategic management. The findings from the study generated evidence of the benefits to be derived from teacher training through ODL. Recommendations: modules, curriculum, specialists/generalist teachers.

Introduction

This study emanated from an unexpected finding in a recent study conducted by EDOREN "Identifying, Recruiting and Deploying Effective Teachers (ETs)." In that study 40 Head teachers were asked to identify the most effective teacher in the lower primary in their schools. The head teachers and the effective teachers had indepth interviews on the background of the ETs, what they do as ETs, what they do differently from other teachers, the enabling factors, the challenges and how they handle the challenges. observations of the ETS performance were also carried out to ascertain correlation between what was said and the reality. these were summarized under five broad headings: their preparation, lesson delivery, classroom management, relationship with pupils/colleagues and personality. All the ETs excelled despite the numerous challenges that incapacitate their colleagues. The Preliminary findings also revealed that 25 out of the 40 identified ETs obtained their Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) which is the national minimum teaching qualification through NTI ODL. This was unexpected considering the general assumption that majority of the teachers trained through ODL are of poor quality. There is broad agreement, both in Nigeria and more widely, that significant improvement in the effectiveness of primary schooling will be highly dependent on the day-to-day performance of classroom teachers. This, in turn, is affected by several factors, including: (i) the professional education of the teacher; (ii) the resources and environment provided for her/his work; and (iii) the level of support provided by state- and school-level management structures. (Watts and Allsop 2015). This present study deals with the first aspect – the professional education of the teachers with the strong believe that even if all the other three factors are important, the type of preparation a teacher receives plays a key role in how effective or ineffective s/he becomes.

ODL is still widely criticized in Nigeria, many believe that it is impossible for students to learn much through the mode, talk less of being effective teachers in schools. In fact most people are of the notion that the ineffectiveness in primary school teachers results from the NTI ODL. There is no empirical evidence to prove these assumptions right or wrong. Hence this case study to investigate and document research evidence of how NCE by ODL contributed to the teachers' effectiveness.

Five central questions were asked and reported on here:

- What impact does your training have on your teaching?
- What aspect of the training did you find most beneficial?
- What aspect of the training did you find not beneficial?
- What challenges did you encounter during the training and how were they handled?

- What suggestions would you give to the institute and students of the institute to enhance the programme and the students' performance as teachers?

Specifically the study looked into the following key areas of their training:

- i. Background of the teachers
- ii. The curriculum and subjects
- iii. Modules
- iv. Teaching methodology
- v. Capacity/quality of facilitators,
- vi. Other resources/facilities/infrastructure,
- vii. Student to student/ student to facilitators relationship,
- viii. Teaching practice,
- ix. Project
- x. Record keeping and monitoring of students' progress and strategic management.

Literature review

There is a dearth of qualitative studies in the area of teacher training through ODL. The available studies are mostly quantitative and focus more on areas of teacher production, teacher effectiveness; teacher demand and supply and teacher utilization. The issue of teacher effectiveness and efficiency is however very crucial to learning achievement; this is why it now occupies center stage in education discourse. Humphrey and Crawford reported that possession of the paper qualification is no guarantee of professional competence and the quality of initial teacher education has been subject to persistent criticisms (e.g. Urwick and Aliyu 2003; Umar 2006; Tahir and Girei 2008; Allsop and Howard 2009).

Research indicate that effective teachers are made through preparation/ knowledge of teaching and learning, subject matter knowledge, experience and combined set of qualifications measured by licensure.(NCATE, 2016).Others include identifying the appropriate duration adequate for the different but related programme of teacher education, teaching of appropriate and relevant pedagogical concepts to match appropriate teacher methodology, developing relevant and useful attitudes and personalities to enhance and pre-dispose effective teaching; and preparing teachers in the subject matter concepts they will teach without over-loading their students with too much content and vice-versa.(Ali, 2000). Invariably effective teachers can only be produced through a professionally developed and recognized pattern and procedure i.e. through adequate preparation. Is this obtainable through NTI ODL?

ODL is seen as a panacea for producing effective teachers, (Rumble, 1993), Kontagora (2014) saw ODL as a cost-effective strategy for improving teacher quality and teacher supply. This study sought the answer from graduates of the institute identified as effective teachers.

When NCE became the minimum teaching qualification in Nigeria, the Grade II Teacher Training Colleges were gradually phased out and Colleges of education and departments of education in universities became the only two broad categories of teacher production. The number of teachers required to meet up the demand of teacher shortage was enormous, and the conventional system was inadequate due to built-in constraint on admission to absolve the quantum number of teachers requiring additional qualification.

Using ODL to train teachers is not new; in many parts of the world, the scheme is well established and compliment conventional training schemes (Perraton 1993). NTI was established in 1976 to upgrade, train and retrain teachers through the ODL to compliment the conventional mode thereby reducing the pressure on conventional teacher training institutions. The institute has over the years been able to perform these functions to a great extent. Records show that it has trained 402,276 teachers so far. Today more than 68,000 teachers across the 36 states plus the Federal Capital Territory are registered for one qualification or another; Pivotal Teacher Training Programme (PTTP), NCE, Degree, Advance Diploma in Education (ADE), and Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE).

For many teachers gaining additional qualification is a lifelong dream, a means to improving themselves which they can now fulfill though NTI programme. For many it was the only option, especially for those with financial constraint, commitments to work and family or lack of local access to higher education. There is flexibility thus

students can work at their pace. Jegede (2002) observed that the establishment of NTI seems to have been the first conscious effort by government to use ODL to improve the quality of teachers in Nigeria.

Research Methodology

The study design was qualitative, it allows for in-depth understanding of individual experiences of participants. Twenty out of the 25 ETs participated in the study, the remaining five were not available. The participants were purposefully selected, and In-depth interviews were conducted by the researcher and a research assistant. Each interview lasted 45 minutes, and was conducted using English and Hausa dialect where the researcher felt a need to get deeper explanations of a concept.

The scope of the study was just the identified ETs from 20 schools where the teachers were found and this constitutes a limitation of the study. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (like Flyvberg, 2006; Yin, 2003) was used in analyzing the data; IPA allows for a close examination of experiences and meaning-making activities of one or small number of people. With IPA it was possible to align detailed exploration of interviewees' experiences and views regarding the impact of their training on their performance as effective teachers and the aspect of the programme they found beneficial.

Excerpt from the interviews are quoted as part of this report to draw home the importance of experiences of the participants.

Findings

The findings are presented according to the six specific research questions:

1. Background of the teachers
2. Impact of their NCE training on their performance as effective teachers
3. Aspects of the programme that was beneficial
4. Aspect of the programme that was not too beneficial
5. Challenges encountered during the programme and how they were overcome
6. Suggestions

1. Background of teachers

All the ETs are female, seventeen have NCE as their highest qualification and the remaining three have first degree. Eight of them hold Grade II Teachers' Certificate before the NCE. They have taught in all the classes of basic primary but are presently handling P1-P3 with 10years (as shortest) and 30 years (as longest) teaching experience. They teach English, Science, Math and Social Studies.

2. Impact of ODL on their performance as effective teachers

The teachers said NTI curriculum is what they like the most because it is well broken down to be understood with or without any instructor. They reported instant impact on their teaching because they were able to practice any new skill or knowledge as soon as they learned them. "*When I was attending NTI there was immediate improvement...*" They did not have to wait to finish the programme before applying even the theoretical aspect.

The rich modules were widely reported to impact on their performance; as reiterated by the participants who acquired degree after the NCE. A teacher said "*the whole thing was like revision, though in an advanced level....When I was in University.... I normally have with me Education modules given to us by NTI.... for more clarification.*" Another teacher observed "*... NTI modules are comprehensive and simplified....*"

The self - study aspect of ODL developed self-reliance and confidence; they discovered that many of their counterparts found it hard to study on their own or use the library adequately. "*the training gave me an edge over my colleagues. It gave me confidence and assurance. NTI taught me how to use the library and how to use and understand the curriculum, modules e.t.c. on my own.*"

Students receive examination time-table three months before examination, which is followed strictly. So students are kept on the alert and well prepared with assignments and tests before examination. For projects students develop 3 to 4 topics to choose from. A teacher said, "*We are paired to discuss, research and write out the project chapter by chapter as our instructor make corrections from conception till finish.*"

Teaching Practice (TP) is conducted twice, 6 weeks each. Supervisors come to observe and correct their mistakes. A teacher said, *"We were sent to various schools across the metropolis.... supervisors take turns in supervising our teaching."* NTI provides a time keeping book daily for students to sign before and after class. The host school also does the same.

3. Aspect of the program that was beneficial to the effective teachers

All the Effective teachers said the curriculum is in order as it covers all the areas required for any specialization they chose. The modules are well planned, unit by unit and easy to understand even without a teacher. They also appreciate so much the Continues Assessment embedded in the modules where students can assess themselves at the end of every unit, this is followed by tutor marked assignments, tests and examinations. They noted the comprehensiveness of the modules which is not found in conventional institutions of learning. *".... Other colleagues from other schools contact us to learn from NTI modules."*

All the teachers found it most beneficial to remain at home with their family, keep their jobs and still acquire additional qualification. *"If no institution of distant learning like NTImaybe I would have given up the pursuit of education.... So thanks to NTI I am here at home with my family yet improved myself and if I am given the opportunity to read for my degree in NTI, I will oblige"*

"People claim that students of NTI suffer misplacement of records, that is not true. NTI has up to date records of students and their activities. When I went to collect my certificate, I only mentioned my registration number and my result was provided within a few minutes."

On student to student/student/facilitators relationships they opined that ODL encourage group learning especially in NTI, they reported that open and distant learning in other schools do not have contact center but NTI has, also NTI's ODL is 20% facilitation and 80% self- study; *"the module is our best tutor...."* Thus at home they create time to read hard and at weekends and holidays they gather for the contact session with facilitators. *"...we use to gather in the school hall on Saturdays to meet with our facilitators, discuss and answer past questions, do our assignments as groups or individually."*

On relationship with facilitators one teacher reported *"As for relationship between students and the Facilitators, the center managers, the coordinators and other students, it was cordial". "We sit on our own to study in group and later meet our instructors for difficult parts"*

4. Aspect of the programme that was not too beneficial to the teachers

They said everything they have learnt from NTI is beneficial *"As a teacher I found all aspect of the training highly beneficial"* such are the words of all the twenty participants, *"Everything I have learnt from NTI is beneficial"* another teacher said *"I am proud to be a teacher and I am proud of telling people I am a graduate of NTI."*

There was however lamentation on delay in accessing the modules sometimes when students fail to register on time; since the module is the heart of the programme, some participants feel that it should be made available at the commencement of the programme whether students have fully paid their tuition or not. As reported by a teacher *"school normally asks us to pay for educational materials which we need but some of the materials we never get until late in the next semester.... that cause us to read double or perform below expectation."*

5. Challenges encountered and how they were handled

The teachers said raising school fees was difficult because their remuneration as teachers is really too poor and they have many expenses at home. Neither sponsorship nor grant to augment their salaries, so paying school fees was quite challenging for all of them. Some confessed to engaging in petty trading or other things to earn additional money for school fees. This normally lingers till very close to examination period, putting them under a lot of stress and tension thereby affecting their concentration at work, school and home.

Another challenge is scheduling examinations for late evenings, this sometimes lasts till dark, and the halls have no proper lighting as they were built for use in the afternoon only or no electric. This affects the performance of weak learners. Some living far from the school use to rush and finish to get home before dark. A teacher said “.... We finished exam by 6pm to reach home late before preparing what to eat, it was very challenging to do that for about two weeks.”

The participants also revealed that at the initial stage of embarking on the programme they use to have problems with the vocabularies in NTI modules because of their weak foundation but were able to get over it and study well especially with the student’s guide handbook.

6. Suggestions to improve ODL and students performance

The participants’ suggestions for NTI hinged on four areas of Challenge: payment of school fees, delayed access to modules, fixing examinations late hours, and sudden change of how study centers were sited.

- NTI were advised to be more compassionate to allow students access all their learning materials, and sit for exams even if they have not paid school fees because they will pay eventually. They wished there was an arrangement where students could pay their school fees in installments. As one teacher observed, “*I plead with NTI to cut down the cost and allow installment payment.*”
- The modules should be made available to students as soon as they enroll, so that they are not left behind.
- All examinations should be slated to end before dark since students are not resident in the study centers and there are many females in the programme, it will not go down well with husbands and parents that their wives or daughters remain outside the house so late. This could be enough reason for some people to develop a dislike for the programme.
- Study centers should be sited in central and easily accessible areas.

The ETs made these suggestions as quoted here to other students:

“The students should endeavor to read a lot, do the self- assessment exercises; attend facilitation, join a study group and be sure to write test and examinations” “...And for those that are hoping to join NTI, here is my strategy on how to meet up with NTI programme. “I resume work by 7am. I return home after 2pm. same time my children return from school. We take lunch, rest a bit and do domestic works. My children go to Islamiya by 4pm to 6pm. That time I write lesson plan for tomorrow’s lesson. I go to bed early to wake up at night to read NTI books. Weekends I read more”.

Discussion

The fundamental point of this case study is the conviction that effective teachers could be produced through ODL. Contrary to opinions that ODL through NTI is to blame for poor quality of teachers, the findings revealed that these effective teachers that were identified in the previous study and used for this study were produced through ODL in NTI. All of them were very categorical on the positive impact the programme had on their performance.

The findings revealed that through the programme they were exposed to the indices submitted by NCATE, (2016) that effective teachers are made through preparation/ knowledge of teaching and learning, subject matter knowledge, experience and combined set of qualifications measured by licensure. The findings also showed that the effective teachers had those other aspect observed by Ali (2000) as necessities for effectiveness. These include identifying the appropriate duration adequate for the different but related programme of teacher education, teaching of appropriate and relevant pedagogical concepts to match appropriate teacher methodology, developing relevant and useful attitudes and personalities to enhance and pre-dispose effective teaching; and preparing teachers in the subject matter concepts they will teach without over-loading their students with too much content and vice-versa. Through the ODL mode these effective teachers were exposed to adequate preparation in a duration of 8 semesters in 4 years; which impacted positively on their performance during and after their training. Most aspects of the programme were seen as beneficial to them especially because they had opportunity to instantly practice any new skill or knowledge learnt. The self-study aspect instilled in them the attitude of independence that enhances confidence and competence. Also the strategic learner support they receive from their facilitators and classmate provides opportunity for sharing of ideas and learning from others.

Their experiences showed that the areas of teacher training criticized as inadequate, subjects taught, Quality/content of module, Teaching/learning methodology, capacity/quality of facilitators, assessment/examination, student/learner support, other resources/facilities/infrastructure, student to student relationship, Student/facilitator relationship, Teaching practice, Project, students' record keeping, supervision and monitoring of students' progress and strategic management; these and others are adequately addressed by NTI ODL.

The findings also revealed some challenges which if not properly addressed could impact negatively on NTI ODL teacher training e.g. delay in accessing modules, students' inability to pay school fees on time due to poor remuneration of teachers, outdated curriculum content (a teacher reported that her daughter is undergoing the same training and the curriculum is exactly like the one during her own training 10 years ago), examination lasting till late evenings; the certificate being looked down as inferior by teacher employers and other stakeholders, demotivation and distraction caused by poor salary, lack of financial support (scholarship) from any source.

Conclusion

This study investigated and documented the experiences and views of 20 teachers that passed through ODL and were identified as effective teachers in a previous study. Their effectiveness was proven time and again through their performance and the impact on their pupils. All the teachers that participated in this study emphasized the impact of their training on their effectiveness as teachers thereby challenging the thinking that the products of the NTI distance education are of poor quality or incompetent. This notion points to a mindset which could distract attention from identifying the real problem underlying teacher quality in Nigeria. Stakeholders need to realize the benefit of ODL in making higher education more accessible to all not just teachers. Without NTI the crisis in teacher quantity and quality would have been worse.

Recommendations

1. NTI should consider uploading their Modules online to be readily accessible to any student that registers. This will reduce the cost of and delay in production.
2. The curriculum needs to be reviewed in line with the revised NCE benchmark
3. NTI should conduct a tracer study on their graduates to establish their quality and areas of improvement
4. Teachers' general welfare should be enhanced to keep them motivated and focused on their job

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