CURRICULUM IMPLICATIONS OF STUDENTS’ LACK OF INTEREST IN PRACTICAL AGRICULTURE: IMPACT ON THE ACHIEVEMENT OF FOOD SECURITY COMPONENT OF (7) POINT AGENDA

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Abstract
This paper seeks to establish the curriculum implications of the relationship between learners’ lack of interest in practical agriculture and food shortage experienced in Nigeria irrespective of various laudable policies made to improve food production among which is the food security component of the 7-point agenda of the present administration. This, the paper will do by looking at these issues: perceived reasons for students lack of interest in practical agriculture, seven -point agenda and food security, curriculum of agricultural education: implication on learners’ interest, strategies for promoting learners’ interest in practical agriculture and prospects of food security through increased learners’ interest in agricultural practices.

Introduction
Agriculture is the art and science of raising crops and animals for the benefit of man. In a broad sense, it involves cultivation of crops, raising and breeding of livestock, processing, storage, distribution and marketing of agricultural products. Agriculture is often regarded as the mainstay of the economy. It is the means of boosting food production to take care of the food need of the teeming population, raw materials for agro-based industries and employment to a large number of the population. The nation’s foreign exchange earning is also boosted by agricultural exports. Based on the important position agriculture occupies in the economy of the nation, Nigerian governments have taken various steps to boost agricultural production and to get many people involved in agricultural practice. Some of the steps include the establishment of the ministry of agriculture and natural sources in the mid sixties, the launching of Operation Feed the Nation in 1976 by then head of state, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, and the Green Revolution programme of President Shehu Shagri in 1980. Other agricultural policies include the creation of the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) in 1988, the National Agricultural Land Development Authority (NALDA) in 1992, Agricultural Insurance Scheme (AIS) in 1992, Agricultural Development Project (ADP), Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SME) scheme in 2003 and presently, the 7-Point Agenda outlined by president Yar ‘Adua in 2007 of which food security is the second component.

Food security as defined by World Bank is the access by all people at all times to enough food for active and healthy life. These policies were aimed at improving the agricultural sector and boosting food security but unfortunately, most of these reforms and policies were short-lived and could not achieve the objectives for which they were instituted. This could be as a result of certain constraints ranging from lack of interest in agriculture, government instability, and poor implementation strategies and emerging development in agricultural technology.

In the National Policy on Education (2004), one of the objectives of agricultural education is to stimulate students’ interest in agriculture. Unfortunately, it is observed that students’ interest in practical agriculture is dwindling by the day because further observations show that the number of students who enroll to do agriculture as their area of specialization is decreasing in our school system. If the trend is left to continue, the prospect of achieving food security as proposed in the 7–point agenda will be a mirage. It now becomes pertinent to refocus the curriculum of practical agriculture with a view of adding those contents and learning experiences that could enhance learners’ interest in the subject since curriculum as defined by Mkpa (1987) is the aggregate of all the planned and organized programmes and experiences to which the learners are exposed under the auspices of the school for the all round development of the learner.
Perceived Reasons for Students’ Lack of Interest in Practical Agriculture

The first objective of agricultural education is to stimulate students’ interest in agriculture. But the objective is not being achieved because instead of students developing interest in agriculture, the reverse is the case. A number of factors could be responsible for this.

In the 1950s and 60s agriculture was accorded great respect in Nigeria because it was the sole revenue earner of Nigerian economy. Those days, there were exports like palm produce, (palm oil and kernel oil) groundnut, cocoa, cotton, hides and skill etc. People were proud to be associated with agriculture because, wealth accrues from there. However, since the oil boom of 1970s, attention was diverted from agriculture to petroleum. The interest of Nigerian youths in agriculture dwindled to the lowest ebb.

It was also observed that the Nigerian agricultural education programmes has remained devoid of practical based skills that could encourage graduates to take up occupation in agriculture. Agricultural education supposed to be vocational in nature in the sense that graduates of JSS3 who do not wish to further their education should become self employed in agriculture.

Additionally, this lack of students’ interest in practical agriculture could be an off-shoot of inadequate curriculum to which they are exposed. Curriculum entails all the activities and learning experiences which learners are exposed to under the guidance of the school. This being the case, there is the need to refocus the curriculum for agriculture to include those contents that will increase the level of interest among the students.

Teaching results in the development of desirable attitudes, interests, ideals, appreciation, understanding habits and abilities, Nkajimeje (1996) opined that the effectiveness of the teaching of practical agriculture could be determined by the extent to which desirable change in the students have been realized. Emphasizing the relevance of ‘doing’ as a key characteristics of good teaching, he stated that unless the ability of skill being taught is put into practice by students, the instruction is not complete. This brings to mind such questions as, are the available teachers adequate in quantity and quality? Are the needed instructional materials available? The issues of methods, techniques, infrastructures and facilities needed for effective implementation of the curriculum should also be taken into consideration.

The 7–Point Agenda and the Achievement of Food Security

President of Nigeria – Umaru Musa Yar’ Adua, on 30th September 2007, outlined the 7–point agenda that will guide his administration. They include power and steel, food security and agriculture, wealth creation, employment, mass transportation, land reform, security and quality and functional education. Two other special interest issues included were the Niger Delta and Disadvantaged Groups.

Recognizing the importance of agriculture in food production, the president of Nigeria, Umaru Musa Yar’ Adua included food security and agriculture as the second agenda which happen to be the emphasis of this paper. The focus of this agenda is on the development of modern technology, financial injection into research, production and development of agricultural inputs, which will revolutionize agricultural sector and lead to a 5-10 fold increase in yield and production. This will result in massive domestic and commercial outputs and technological knowledge transfer to farmers.

This is not the first time in Nigeria such policy has been made as indicated above and yet, the nation is still facing acute food shortage. Up till today, some agricultural products are still imported into the country. Nigerian farmers do not produce food that meets the demand of the populace. Agricultural activities are still dominated by subsistence practices by peasant farmers. Even the young school leavers who graduated in agriculture prefer to look for white collar jobs than going into the farms. The reason could be attributed to the fact that farming is regarded as energy and time consuming, dirty and best for illiterates and peasants who are not interested in getting rich. The 20th century farming entails more than that. A lot of complex agricultural equipments have been introduced to save energy, time and to enhance high productivity. Such equipments include harvesters, suction machines, bulldozers etc. Irrigation system is also in use to enable farmers work all through the year. If the government of the day is sincere to the achievement of the objectives of food security in the country, it then means that credit facilities should be provided for the farmers, farming equipments and machines should be provided at subsidized rates. Farm inputs – seedlings, fertilizers, insecticides etc should not be left out. Government should buy excess quantity of the seasonal foods.
The Curriculum of Practical Agriculture: Implication on Learners’ Interest

As spelt out in the National policy on Education (2004), the junior secondary school is supposed to be pre-vocational and academic oriented which entails that learners will be exposed to all the basic subjects that will enable them acquire the needed knowledge and develop skills. In addition, the policy states that students who leave school at the junior secondary stage may then go on to apprenticeship under any chosen skill. Based on this, the curriculum at this level was structured into three areas, core subjects, pre-vocational subjects and non-vocational. Practical Agriculture is one of the core (compulsory) subjects to be offered by all students at this level of education. Unfortunately, the reverse is the case because research report, especially by Ugwu (2000) shows that many students who passed agriculture at the secondary school certificate examinations never wished to practice agriculture, talk less of continuing with the subject at the university level. Those who could not continue schooling after this level, resorted to other skills or trades outside agriculture due to a number of reasons which include lack of skill acquired in the course during their stay at school, lack of interest in practical agriculture.

Certain questions come to mind as to why students do not have interest in this subject. For instance, is the curriculum enriched with contents and learning experiences that will promote learners interest in the subject?, is the subject taught by adequately qualified teachers?, are schools provided with adequate facilities and equipments to guarantee the production of highly motivated students who are interested in engaging in practical agriculture?, How many schools can boast of school farms especially, private schools that hardly have enough space for classrooms?

Strategies for Promoting Student’s Interest in Practical Agriculture

It has become very pertinent that efforts should be made to instill interest in practical agriculture in the students. To achieve this, efforts should be directed towards achieving the laudable objectives of agricultural education. To do this therefore, National Education Research and Development Council (NERDC) recommended that each school should establish a school farm as a field laboratory for the training of the learners. When the learners constantly engage in agricultural practices while in school, they will be used to the practice and may develop the zeal to practice what they have learnt in school. When a large number of graduates engage in agricultural production, it will definitely lead to increase in food production which will subsequently go a long way to solve the lingering food crisis ravaging the nation.

One of the objectives of agricultural education at the senior secondary level according to NPE (2004) is to provide technical knowledge and vocational skills necessary for agricultural, industrial, commercial and economic development. To achieve this WAEC (2004 – 2008) syllabus recommends strategies such as:

- Supplementary classroom study with visits to well established government and private experimental and commercial farms, Agricultural research institutes and other institutions related to agriculture.
- Keeping school farms where crops are grown and different species of livestock kept.
- Keeping practical notebooks where records of individual activities and observation carried out in the school farms, field trips are outlined.
- Continuous assessment of candidates to enhance effective teaching–learning process and better performance of candidates.

The importance of these strategies need not be over emphasized because field trips help students to develop broad general understanding and comprehension of the topic to be discussed. It also helps to develop interest in the course. It helps the students to collect data from establishments visited and record them for use in carrying out assignments. The importance of school farm include – demonstration of approved techniques and practices for students practical learning, supervision and grading. It also helps in training students in the use of machines and implements, in observations, practice of record keeping and training in co-operation.
Prospects of Food Security through Increased Learners’ Interest in Agricultural Practices.

Nigeria is a nation blessed with large expanse of land favourable for agricultural purposes. What is required is the governments’ ability to demonstrate the will to make a positive change in the sector. There are bright prospects to increase the level of learner’s interest in agricultural practices if the militating and overwhelming problems are squarely and vigorously addressed. This means that human and material resource requirements should be adequate in quality and quantity. The agricultural programme must be planned to be more practical and production based. There is also need to make the learners aware that there is hope for them to make a living after graduation in the agricultural sector. This could be done by organizing field trips and excursion to already established agricultural and agro-allied establishments such as farm settlements, poultry farms, fish farms, pineapple orchards, palm plantations etc. The aim of this is to let the learners see, assess and analyze situations by themselves, and to develop the interest and zeal to engage in agriculture immediately after graduation. It is high time agriculture is left in the hands of people with professional knowledge and technical know-how to go into commercial production of food and not subsistence practice.

Learners learn well and develop interest in a subject when the teachers teach well. To enhance the teachers’ capability, there should be human capacity building of the teachers through such programmes as seminars, workshops, conferences, excursions and agricultural exhibitions. Another factor that could motivate teachers of agriculture to work harder is to ensure that promotion and payment of teachers’ salaries and allowances are made as and when due. They should be encouraged to explore their environments to identity suitable companies, agro-allied companies and commercial farms and make good use of them for demonstration purposes. Sometimes, teachers may need to take students out on field trips and excursions but there will be no fund for it. The students alone cannot fund the number of field trips and excursions they need. Therefore, the school authority, the government, through the ministry of education, should encourage these learners by providing this fund needed for these trips, and the diversion of such fund should be avoided by the teacher and school authorities.

There is need to ensure that every school that teaches practical agriculture should have school farms and if possible, all the agriculture students should have individual portions where they could practice the skills they have acquired. This will help them to know their strength and weakness and in improving on their mistakes. This is because they are bound to bring the acquired skills, knowledge and competencies to bear on their agricultural practices. The use of crude implements should be replaced with modern and sophisticated machineries, improved seedlings, pesticides and fertilizers.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the objectives of the agricultural education programme in Nigerian schools are laudable and lofty, yet over the years, learners’ interests in the subject keep dwindling per day. This loss of interest in the learners who are the people to replace the illiterate and peasant subsistence farmers does not augur well with food production and food security being pursued by the present administration through the seven point agenda. This paper deduced that lost of interest could have emanated form the fact that the national interest diverted from agriculture to petroleum production. Therefore agriculturists virtually were run out of business because of negligence. The learners and even parents saw no hope in taking up agriculture as an occupation because it will amount to putting oneself in perpetual abject poverty.

The government and school authorities should reverse the situation by making adequate provision for the human and material resources needed to ensure that all the implementation guidelines outlined by WAEC are strictly adhered to. It is therefore suggested that for learners to develop interest in the subject as to learn it, practice it and progress in it, teachers should be made adequate in quality and quantity and that school farms must be provided in schools with modern equipments for practice. Furthermore, enough incentives will be given to encourage the learners on field trips and excursions. The improved interest will lead to increase in food production and food security.
References

