

Exploiting the Vocational Interest of the Nigerian Child for Informed Choice of Vocational Careers

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Abstract

Nigeria is blessed with abundant natural and human resources including vocational talents and callings. There are some persons in the society who are naturally endowed with vocational talents but may never have the opportunity to develop them. Such talents may remain undiscovered and undeveloped unless opportunities are created. It is the opinion of the writers that Government and other interested developmental agencies ought to embark on massive talent-hunt, beginning with children at the elementary level of education so as to tap the rich human resources the nation is so-blessed with. This article seeks to highlight the problems associated with early detection and development of vocational skills in children which include, late awareness of the importance of Vocational/Technological Education in Nigeria, failure to identify vocational talents in early childhood education, lack of follow-up of children's vocational callings and misconceptions about vocational education. Attempt was also made to identify some implications of these problems for education in Nigeria. The article finally proffers suggestions for improvement in the early identification and development of talents in technology education especially at the elementary level.

KEY WORDS: Vocational talent, Talent-hunt, Vocational skills, Early childhood education, Vocational calling and Misconceptions

Introduction

Vocational Technical Education as an integral part of education in Nigeria seeks to provide manipulative skills through theoretical and practical training. According to the National Policy on Education (2004), the goals of Technical and Vocational Education shall be to provide trained manpower in the Applied Sciences, Technology and Business, particularly at craft, advanced craft and technical levels; provide the technical knowledge and vocational skills necessary for agriculture, commercial and economic development; and give training and impart the necessary skills to individuals who shall be self-reliant economically. This calls attention to vocational development programmes for children from the elementary level of education that will enhance their ability to recognize their talents early enough. However, from observations vocational development and interventions have focused on adolescents and young adults. The lack of attention to career development antecedent in children has led to serious neglect of this period of life when the foundation is laid for career choices and outcomes in later life (Vondracek 2001). Some researchers and the general public, erroneously accept the view that childhood is a period of fantasy and play. Hence, children are believed to be incapable of understanding the world of work.

Despite the theoretical advances within the field, empirical research on children's vocational behavior has gone largely unappreciated and unexplored in the broader child development and career literatures (Hartungs, Porfeli & Vondracek, 2005; Watson & McMahon, 2005). Two factors may contribute to this fact. First, researchers and practitioners commonly view childhood as a period of fantasy and play that is cognitively disconnected from the world of work (Trice, Hughes, Odom, Woods, & McClellan, 1995). A review of empirical research during the past century suggests that children as young as 4 and 5 years old have a fairly realistic understanding of occupations, which becomes more stable over time (Hartungs, et al., 2005). As early as 1909, Pearson had acknowledged the importance of vocational development during childhood.

Despite the increasing delay in the transition from school to work and the erroneous view of children being disconnected from the world of work, theorists addressing life span career development across the 20th century have attended to childhood as an important formative period for career development (Erickson, 1964; Ginsberg, Ginsberg, Aexenred & Herma 1951; and Vondracek, 2001). The agreement among these scholars suggests that children as early as the elementary grade school years establish a worker orientation and a coherent view of the world of work. Unfortunately, the majority of these theoretical works have gone unexplored in the empirical literature devoted to children (Hurtings, et al, 2005). Vocational development framework should explore how children are socialized to become members of the workforce as a way of fixing the childhood period along the developmental continuum that leads to adolescence and beyond. This exploratory process may begin as early as the Elementary school years. In a literature review Hartungs, et al (2005) and Watson and McMahon (2005) derived five findings which suggest that vocational development may be linked to an emerging sense of self as early as the elementary school years.

There are several other organizational formations in Nigeria, beyond the elementary school stage, where vocational skills and competencies could be acquired, either formally or informally. These include trade centres, trade schools, craft centres, local craft workshops, technical colleges, tertiary institutions including Colleges of Education (Technical), Monotechnics, Colleges of Technology, Polytechnics and Universities. In recent times, the Nigerian government introduced additional programmes to boost vocational activities. The National Poverty Eradication Programme of the Federal Government of Nigeria is one of such programmes involving the training of young school leavers, the unemployed, retired public servants, those from the private sector and the less privileged in various forms of skills acquisition. The National Directorate of Employment (NDE) is another formal government establishment that is saddled with a similar responsibility.

Despite all these sources of providing vocational skills, the planning and especially the implementation of the programmes still leave much to be desired. This impairment is mostly attributable to the government who is the chief planner and executor. However, it is possible that the lack of success of these programmes can rightly be attributed to the lack of early detection and encouragement of talents that lead to the development of interest in vocational skills. Education has been recognized as the instrument “per excellence” for effecting national development (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). The progress and development of any nation and indeed the whole world is closely connected with its educational potentials. The school is the major educational agency for transmitting learning. It is undoubtedly the instrument for individual as well as society’s growth, development and therefore progress (Ojogan & Oganwu, 2006). It is therefore pertinent that our educational system pays attention to vocational development at all levels. This article seeks to highlight the problems associated with early detection and development of vocational skills in children and the need for the introduction of talent hunt at the elementary level of education.

Problems Associated with Detection and Development of Vocational Skills in Children

Vocational education is a type of education intentionally designed for those who have chosen specific callings or careers and really want to develop further in those careers. This choice cannot be made in a hurry and unguided. It is the responsibility of both parents and teachers to guide children into vocations of their interest. This feat has been near impossible to achieve due to problems associated with early detection and development of vocational skills in children which include: late awareness of the importance of Vocational/Technological Education in Nigeria, failure of parents and teachers to see the need for early identification of vocational talents in children, lack of follow-up of children’s vocational callings and misconceptions about vocational education.

In Nigeria, technological awareness only started setting in by the middle of the 20th century when significant technological achievements were already made by some developed countries. Some of these technological advancements include the Artificial Satellite named SPUTNIK I, which was the first to be launched into space in 1956 by the Russians. Other countries such as the United States of America also embraced Vocational Technical/Technology Education objectively and soon joined the space exploration and other technological developments. In response to these developments, the government of Nigeria has done so much to signify her interest in technology education, but it is rather unfortunate to note that only very little has been achieved in this direction. The second half of the 20th century only noticed some archaic technological presence in Nigeria. Electronics were characterized by record players called Gramophones. It involved winding a spring-loaded mechanism that provided a rotating effect while unwinding and was used to produce sound.

The radio receivers were built with thermionic valves that take some time to heat up before sound can be produced. Even the television sets were built with thermionic valves that took some reasonable time to heat up before pictures appeared on the screen. Telecommunications involved long trailing cables over the distance to be communicated. The automobile sector was dominated by Lorries whose engines were started by manual winding. The lorry driver was seated on the driver's seat to regulate the throttle pedal while the "motor-boy", as was called, stood in front of the lorry and wound the engine as fast as possible with a manual winder. Presently, the worry is that even these so called archaic and obsolete technologies are yet to take off indigenously in Nigeria. Nigeria still imports almost every aspect of technology till date. Our natural abundant raw materials are still exported, processed abroad and then imported into Nigeria for Nigerians to buy at exorbitant costs. This situation can be attributed to the fact that the Nigerian educational system has over the years, emphasized technology in principles but implementation has always been faulty. This calls for a concerted effort by all stakeholders in our educational system to design a system that will create technological awareness in the Nigerian youth and develop interest in technology education that will turn the situation around. It is the duty of homes, schools and colleges to provide children with the educational experiences relevant to their future vocational interests. The earlier this is done, the better.

Identifying Vocational Talents

We all have talents, that is, areas where we show special abilities or aptitudes. We may be talented in music, mathematics, sports or any other vocational area. Often, we show our talents from an early age by the special abilities we exhibit, but the way our talents develop depends on the environment we find ourselves in. That is, on the encouragement we receive from parents and guardians, mentors and the educational system. Sometimes, people are inspired to develop their talents through the example of mentors. They may see a particular skill in someone they adore, practice it constantly and develop expertise in it. In most technologically developed countries parents observe and study the play tendencies of their children from birth. Children are exposed to all sorts of play items in the form of assorted kinds of toys.

It is good for parents in every culture to know their children as individuals and find out what is special about each of them. They should play an important role in helping children discover and develop their talents. To do this, parents may need to make very keen observations of the play tendencies of their children. In order to understand the Nigerian child in relation to his vocational needs, it is necessary to consider how the child's position has been conceived in the traditional Nigerian society. Children who have vocational talents as well as those with academic talents show them from those formative years through their play inclinations. When such observations are carefully and correctly made, and are combined with appropriate counseling, the child is appropriately guided to grow into his/her natural calling. This will ensure that learners' attempt at choosing careers appropriate to their capabilities, interests and aptitudes is correctly channeled and nurtured. This enables children to grow and excel in their naturally endowed vocations.

In the Nigerian society, our biggest handicap is the lack of these observations especially during childhood. Experience has shown that a great proportion of Nigerian parents will want their children to become doctors, lawyers, engineers, accountants and so on without a consideration of their natural talents. Consequently, many youth venture into careers that are not of their vocational calling and the results are in most cases, not encouraging. Even now, many parents erroneously believe that such talent discoveries should be made by schools. The school on the other hand, believes that the home should be the ideal place to start these discoveries. However, Newgent, Lee, & Daniel (2005) pointed out that some less informed people might argue that primary school children are yet developing and cannot be associated with any definite talent, but we need to realize that talent should be progressively developed in unison with progressive development of intellectual abilities, aptitudes and interests of children.

If children's talents need to be discovered early in life, then the onus is on both the home and the school to give them the needed vocational guidance. Vocational guidance here refers to the process through which an individual is helped to choose a suitable occupation, make the necessary preparation for it such as enrolling in training programmes, enter into it and develop in it. This is a continuous process and should start early in one's life. In the past, vocational trades were seen as jobs meant for the "never do wells". Occupations such as tailoring, carpentry, auto mechanic works and electrical works were seen as professions for the drop outs.

Today, it is a well known fact that these occupations form the bedrock of technology on which development anchors. Those who have the calling in these vocations are indeed the much needed professionals in the society.

Follow-Up of Children with Vocational Talents

The identification of vocational talents is not an end in itself but a means to an end. It is therefore necessary to follow-up children who are identified to have vocational talents. If vocational education is understood as education which provides visual stimuli, assorted experiences, perceptual learning, cognitive information, affective awareness and psychomotor skills, then effort should be made to enhance children's interest in exploring, establishing and maintaining themselves in the wider world of work. As Newgent, Lee, & Daniel (2005) pointed out, a well planned programme of pre-vocational education in collaboration with parents, can prepare elementary school children and initiate them smoothly into the real vocational programmes. Vocational education is specialized education, education for work, indeed any kind of work which an individual finds interesting and for which the society has need.

It may as well be appropriate to define vocational education as that education that seeks to uncover, discover or bring to light the natural inclination of individuals, especially the youth and encourage them to continuously improve and bring out the best through further studies and practice. This is still a challenge in the nation's educational sector. A body like the National Directorate of employment should be given a more defined legislative authority (law) establishing it so that it can more vigorously pursue poverty alleviation, vocational training and discover vocational callings and cause such potentials to be manifested. After all, Nigeria has a lot of undiscovered and undeveloped natural vocational talents. There is therefore, a strong need to explore and exploit any vocation envisaged to be someone's vocational calling. This will go a long way to raise a pool of vocational trainees who will add to the technical manpower needed to move Nigeria to the next level of technological development.

Educational Implications

Vocational education is concerned with securing of skills for an occupation. This paper has highlighted thus far, the need for early identification and encouragement of talents in specific technical areas. This cannot be achieved until the importance of building essential tools into the early childhood education curriculum for identifying and encouraging vocational talents in children is understood. According to Usoro and Edu (2006) technical education is offered at three levels with each level performing functions that lead towards the achievement of educational goals. At the elementary level lasting for six years, they explained that, technical education is taught as career awareness to pupils. At this level, the pupils learn about the world of work and are made to understand the dignity of labour and appreciate the sound contributions made by various occupational groups. If the importance of vocational education is not emphasized at home, such education at the primary level will have a weak foundation. The same applies to all other levels of education.

When career interest is built at home and primary school levels it becomes easy for the child to fit into the Junior Secondary School level where career exploration is offered through Introductory Technology. The students at this level, explore occupational levels with hands-on activities or workshop experience in major occupational areas through subjects like building technology, electrical/electronic technology, metal work, plastics, plumbing, technical drawing, power mechanics, technology of appliances and others. Graduates of the Junior Secondary Schools proceed to the Senior Secondary Schools where the emphasis shifts to career specialization. Learners at this level are prepared to enter into careers and continue in post secondary or enter into professional programmes. This smooth process of vocational training is bound to suffer set backs if children with technical talents are not identified and encouraged to fill the technical manpower needs in our industries

Conclusion

The conservation and full utilization of a nation's natural resource with human labour depends on vocational training. Such training, according to Olaitan (1978) must be given to those who need it and can profit by it. The early identification of children with vocational interests and adequate encouragement to enter technology related professions will ensure sustainable manpower production. Those who actively explore career choices obtain occupations that are more congruent with their emerging sense of self (Blustein, Phillips, Jobin-Davis, Finkelberg, & Roarke, 1997 and Vondracek et al., 1995).

This ultimately leads to more satisfaction during the early adult years (Blustein et al., 1997). Adolescents who successfully transit from school to secure jobs that are congruent with their talents, values, and interests are better positioned to achieve other important life goals, such as family role aspirations and expectations associated with the adult years (Schulenberg, Maggs, & O'Malley, 2003). Thus, the exploitation and development of vocational talents in the Nigerian child is vital. Career development starts early in life. Elementary school is not too soon to introduce children to the process of career development. At this level they are eliminating career choices based on gender roles as well as level of prestige. The school can help students to know the vocational options available to them.

Suggestions for Improvement

To ensure that vocational education draws the best talents, the following suggestions are made:

- The Nigerian government at all levels (federal, state and local governments) should sensitize parents and the general public on the importance of vocational education using the media.
- Public forums should be organized for interactions between parents, teachers and children to dissuade parents from forcing children into careers they have no aptitude and interest in.
- The curriculum for primary schools should give adequate attention to vocational content considering the socio-economic and ethnic values of our society and how they relate to careers.
- Develop a comprehensive programme promoting career discussion that involves both family and school based interventions that engage all students and families. Facilitating family school partnership can lead to academic and career success for students. Thus parents should be engaged by promoting discussions of career options.
- Students should be helped to identify their abilities because this will reduce their helplessness.
- Some career interest inventories should be designed for elementary students to get them to identify their talents.
- Increase self esteem. The higher the self esteem of the students the more likely they will be opened to opportunities; not eliminating as many options. Help at risk students experience the reinforcing power of success.
- Students and families should be encouraged to read books that depict the success stories of people from various vocational backgrounds.
- Give the children hope for a positive future and success. Role models/mentors should be invited for a career day to talk about options and explain how they reduce the barriers they went through in the process of developing their careers. This may assist students to keep options open and even expand options with the new information.
- Children should be monitored both at home and in school to identify and encourage those who have vocational talents taking into consideration their personalities and how such personalities can fit into particular careers of their interest.
- Children should be motivated to show interest in vocational activities through the provision of adequate environment and materials at home and in school. Activities should be assigned to them that will help them explore their talents.
- Vocational guidance programmes should be organized for children right from the primary school level using role models. This can be done by inviting professional experts and business people to address them on job opportunities available in the world of work.
- The vocational guidance programmes suggested above, can only be feasible through the introduction of career guidance counselors into the primary school system to help direct the young minds towards the formation of right attitudes to careers of their interest.
- We advocated automatic scholarship award to children who embrace any aspect of technical education.

- A body like the National Directorate of employment should be given a more defined legislative authority (law) establishing it so that it can more vigorously pursue poverty alleviation, vocational training and discover vocational callings and cause such potentials to be manifested.

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