

SURVIVAL OF THE NIGERIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

A Book of Readings

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THE SURVIVAL OF NIGERIAN PRIMARY EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Primary education is seen as the foundation to every educational endeavour in Nigeria. The *National Policy on Education* (1981) agrees with this view and further states that since the rest of the education system is built upon it, the primary level is the key to the success or failure of the whole education system. This level of education is expected to inculcate in Nigerian children permanent literacy, numeracy, and ability to communicate effectively. The laying of a sound basis for science and reflective thinking as well as character and moral training form part of its objectives. From the above objectives among others, one perceives how valuable primary education is in the nation.

Parents and indeed the whole country do not seem to be joking with this level of education. This assertion is derived from several sacrifices and provision made by both sectors towards making their children acquire primary education. Unfortunately, the state of the art does not seem to be reflecting the commitment of the public to this level of education. Rather, there is a threat of collapse. It would be necessary to examine some of the factors contributing directly or otherwise to this state.

The state of the art

As stated in the *National Policy on Education* (1981:12) "Government has made Primary Education free and universal by implementing the UPE Scheme in September 1976 and proposes to make it compulsory as soon as possible". This statement reveals in clear terms what government intends with primary education in Nigeria. On the part of parents, there is an increasing preference of private schools and the accommodation of attendant inconveniences in terms of cost in cash and energy (Obinaju, 1995). One would love to ask, are these enough to make primary education provide the required foundation to all educational levels in Nigeria.

More and more parents withdraw their children from public schools to private schools. They observe and rightly too, that the public primary education which forms the major thrust of primary education in Nigeria is at the brink of collapse. They would rather rescue their children than allow them to sink along with the educational system at this level, thus, the trend of more people sacrificing money and time to send their wards to private school.

Their reasons include the non-functionality of the system. When teachers of the public primary school are not in full blown strike, they are working to rule owing to non-payment of their remunerations. This situation conspires to render the syllabus in the public schools never covered. The tendency of strike and working to rule is not as rampant in the private primary schools. One therefore understands the preference of private primary schools to public ones for those who can afford the cost.

The singular factor of not finishing the syllabus leads to quite a number of consequences. In the first place, there will be a rush effect on the pupils at any point that

these pupils will be taking an important out-of-school (external) examination. Of course, only a negligible percentage of students would be able to cope academically with the rush. Therefore there will be a mass poor performance at the external examination. A situation which renders both the school community and the ministry very anxious.

Poor performance at an external examination and the anxiety generated even before the examination as a result of poor preparation normally leads to a tendency towards examination malpractice and frustration after the examinations. Examination malpractice arises from lack of confidence on the part of the teacher and on the part of the pupils as a result of lack of adequate coverage of the syllabus and frustration comes when the reality of non-performance manifest in either failure or poor grades.

In some cases, pupils are groomed just for an examination and they end up passing it. The syllabus still remains uncompleted and there still exists gaps in acquisition processes of the child. By implication the pupil passes into the next level of education. The uncompleted segment of the syllabus which is assumed by the curriculum of the next level of education to have been covered now becomes an impediment to the child's progress in educational attainment. This phenomenon renders the next level of the child's education difficult and even more frustrating to him. Thus, primary education in the circumstances does not lay a solid foundation for the education of the child as would be the case.

More so, when teachers stay for more than three months without a salary as is frequently the case, they lack commitment to the job. When teachers salaries were handed over to the local government areas in 1992, schools in many parts of the country were just not functioning. Onoyase (1993) describes this period as a period of darkness for teachers. According to him, primary education in Delta and Edo States, witnessed incessant strike actions from teachers and associate unions during this time. In Anambra State, for instance, 1993/94 session witnessed reduced terms as many weeks were lost to non-attendance of school. In Akwa Ibom State, the same session lost a whole term to strike due to the same reason. Furthermore, lack of payment of salaries forces the teacher to explore other avenues for survival. When salaries are finally paid, there is no guarantee that the teacher would abandon what he has found to keep himself busy during the long period of non-attendance of school.

With poor salaries, many aspects of the teachers extra-school occupation may be yielding higher revenue which serves as a motivation for him to continue with this pre-occupation even when schools are back into full force. These render the teacher none in the least committed to the job of teaching, giving and marking assignments as he must share his time between his official profession and some extraneous occupation.

On the part of the students, Hargreaves (1980) note that, they like free time in form of holidays. Students would on their own be listening out to hear when next there will be a strike action. They also are not fully committed to learning because they have been brought into this unfortunate tradition of intermittent schooling with periods of closures seemingly out-weighing the periods the schools actually function.

Gone are the days when teachers were seen provided for in terms of accommodation within school premises. It must be noted that teachers accommodation on school premises provided many worthwhile functions such as protection for school property, maintenance of a high degree of sanitation in the school, teachers punctuality to work and in short

more functionality of the educational practice. Since the late seventies, the tendency of accommodating the teachers within the school premises had since faded out. The benefits also went with the practice.

However, the story may be different in private schools where education is of course not free. High fees are charged. Therefore these schools scarcely go on strike neither do they owe teachers's salaries. Although they too do not accommodate their teachers, there seems to be a better level of schooling with the private schools than with public schools. But how many of the Nigerian children are privileged to attend such schools?

From the above, it appears that there is a diversion of attention on the part of the governments from the primary school level of education. The mere handing over of primary education to local government areas in 1992 showed the federal government's attempt at shaking off its responsibility towards primary school education. Happily however, the primary Education Commission has been reinstated which responsibility according to Onoyase (1993) is to manage funds made available for the primary schools. Teachers' salaries have started being paid regularly but the evils of "period of darkness" have not completely disappeared. Teachers' allowances in form of leave grant, transport and housing increases have not been paid. Teachers are still not dedicated to work as their outside engagements take more of their time than their professional employment.

In summary, the public school system at the primary level has ceased to provide a desired foundation to the other levels of education in the country. The reason has been traced to two factors, poor and irregular payment of teachers salaries which leads to frequent strike actions in this sector and lack of commitment on the part of government. These two factors threaten the survival of the Nigerian primary school system. Thus, there arises a need for strategies to be put in place towards revamping this level of education.

Strategies towards the survival of primary education in Nigeria

From the foregoing analysis, the primary school system is very weak and may soon affect other levels of education in Nigeria adversely. Strategies must therefore be put in place to remedy this situation so as to restore the foundation of the other levels of education.

The major part of the remedy lies with the government. Government's attitude towards the primary level of education seems to lack commitment. This is reflected in dilapidated school buildings, lack of teachers commitment, strike actions in some cases and pupils laissez-faire attitude towards their education. Government therefore has to retrace its steps. Among the first things which need attention are teachers' welfare. When teachers' salaries and other entitlement are paid regularly and on time, the commitment on the part of the teacher would be restored. Government too would be able to enforce discipline where there are lapses. Accommodation for teachers hinges on teachers' welfare. Their accommodation within the school premises would be reintroduced. Once this is re-instated, all the attendant benefits will return to our schools. Other demands from this sector should also be looked at promptly and attended to so as to give the teacher a sense of belonging.

This singular proposal is geared towards helping in the prevention of striking actions in the primary school system. Strikes as noted above have single handedly marred the

education of Nigerian children and have prevented them from realising the benefits of a fruitful educational environment (Nwokocha, 1993).

As children enjoy holidays (Hargreaves, 1980) and regard every teachers' strike period as such, making education "compulsory" as intended by government (NPE, 1981:12) without ensuring that schools remain open negates the intention, becomes meaningless, impracticable and a waste of pupils' time. On resumption after every long period of closure, there is usually a dearth of pupils attendance as many have stowed away depending upon consequences and conveniences of the period. Many of them abandon school for trades they had started and others only wait to start a new session. Compulsory education implies that no children of school age should stay out of school (Peters, 1979). Compelling children to go to school cannot be realistic where education is not "free". Not all parents can afford the exigencies of education even at the primary level. The government should make, at the least, this level of education free.

It is understood that since September 1976, fees have not been charged at this level of education, but improper funding of schools has left parents-Teachers associations with no options than to impose levies to salvage some vital sections of the school. Children have had to take to school writing desks and stools. School uniforms and books are other areas where parents have to provide for their wards. These provisions still make education at this level far from being free. It stands to reason that those who cannot afford these do not have equal opportunity of primary education and cannot benefit at the same level from its curriculum. Free education as proposed here should be able to provide every Nigerian child a decent school compound void of erosion and flood, well constructed buildings in the form of classrooms, desks for both pupils and teachers, books and uniform. Government provision should include teaching equipment in form of machines, projectors and other aids which would encourage the teacher to prepare his instruction appropriately. When these are provided, it would then be rational to expect every Nigerian child to be in school and to impose sanctions on non-compliance.

Yitnoe (1992) identifies one other area where primary school functioning requires attention. According to him inspection and supervision of primary schools help to maintain standards expected of the institutions. With the picture of the existing Nigerian primary schools presented above, inspection and supervision have been grossly lacking. Standards had been at different levels depending on the practices of the different Local Government Areas. With the re-institution of the National Primary Education Commission, inspections and supervision should be revived to revamp our school system.

In fact, public school should set the pace which private ones follow and not the reverse as it is the case at present. Private proprietors should be craving to meet up provision and standards provided by government for public schools. These public schools also stand the change of benefiting from provision of highly skilled man-power much more than the private schools. It is noted that government employs these highly skilled labour more than the private sector. What remains is to tap adequately from their resources for the benefit of the school system and their pupils.

Nkemkolam (1992) makes a proposal which seems the best option:

- De-emphasizing qualification for employment at different levels of education. More highly qualified teachers like first and second degree holders should be engaged to lay the foundation at the primary school level while N.C.E. holders could carry on the secondary school level. Salaries should of course be paid to them according to their status and not according to the level of education in which they teach. By so doing, the foundation will be properly laid and the follow-up education in the secondary and tertiary schools will be able to progress significantly from what obtains at present.

CONCLUSION

The present Nigerian Primary system of education is intended to lay a solid foundation for the other different levels of education. Unfortunately, lack of commitment on the part of government especially in the domain of teachers welfare has combined with declaration of free education with insufficient equipment of the school have negated this intention. Nigerian primary education system is seen at the brink of collapse. Thus something urgent needs be done to revamp and restore this level of education so as to fulfil its mission. Solutions proffered to these include the continuation of free education and making education also compulsory while the government should show more commitment towards this level of education. Teachers's salaries should be paid regularly and on time. Accommodation should be provided for them inside the school compound. More highly qualified staff should be recruited and paid for this level of education, thereby liberalizing the present practice. These among others discussed above would go a long way towards ensuring the survival of primary education in Nigeria.

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