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THE NIGERIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM: CHALLENGES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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Introduction

This paper will review essentials of the past educational system in Nigeria, some of the major steps/decisions taken which affect education and the state of the art in present day Nigeria. In doing these, we will try to use a crystal ball to look at the future of the 21st century to see how the happenings of today will either benefit or challenge educational dispensation in the 21st century. After the above review, we will try to suggest/recommend a path which if education is wheeled on, some of the challenges would be overcome before it deals a dirty blow on the Nigerian system of education.

Nigerian System of Education

Review of the Past

Nigeria has always had indigenous education which to large extent was informal. Formal education was brought about by foreign traders and missionaries. These informed the first few schools we had. To a large extent also, the idea was patterned after the colonial native education system and their purpose for education in Nigeria. We already know that, during the era under review, the 3Rs were emphasized – reading, writing and arithmetic.

The sense of independence also invoked education for self-realization and self-actualization. The curriculum conference of 1969 and the Ashby report, tagged “Investment in Education” laid the foundation for expansion in education at all levels. This was however disrupted by the Nigerian Civil War (1967 – 1970). When states were created, education came under the control of the Ministry of Education. There was expansion in educational development and enrolment with oil boom of the 1970s. During this period, what was observed was increased enrolment in primary and secondary schools all over the country in proportion to acceptability of secular education. The number of Universities increased from original five to thirteen in 1973. In 1976, the UPE was introduced although faced with numerous problems.

In 1977, the first edition of the National Policy on Education was published to give guidance to educational dispensation at all levels. All these were done in order to build Nigeria as a “free, democratic and just society, a united, strong and self-reliant nation, a great and dynamic economy, and a land of bright and full opportunities for all her citizens” (NPE, 1977).

From this time on ward, education been divided distinctly into Pre-primary, primary, secondary, vocational, tertiary, mass literacy and non-formal sections. Each of these has specific aims and objectives. The National Policy on Education has been revised from time to time, the last edition being 2004. In it, educational services, financing, administration and supervision guidelines are specified.

As Obinaju (2006), observes, the curriculum of many country’s education is the direct address to the country’s problems with a view to solving them. Ever since the National Policy on Education was evolved, the curriculum has continually responded to the provisions in there while the document has continually been revised to address the countries perceived problems.

Challenges of the Present

Nigeria today is a very large country with well over 450 ethnic groups and as many languages spoken within her boundaries. Specifically, Nigeria has a population of about 140 million people living within 774 local government areas in 36 states plus Federal Capita Territory. On the education

scene, Nigeria by 2006 had about 65 universities, 64 Colleges of Education, 70 Polytechnics, 9,000 secondary schools and 44,000 primary schools. Today, the number is increasing at a very fast rate especially because of establishment of private schools. Furthermore, Nigeria is considered as the most powerful African country by other African countries and even beyond. She in fact nicknamed "The Giant of Africa". Of late, she has witnessed many intra and inter-ethnic crises, some predicted with religious sentiments, and others bordering on land and resource ownership. There has been several civil wars within Africa where Nigeria has had to contribute to peacekeeping as well as harbouring displaced people. With these in focus and in realization that education through its curriculum is the means through which any nation inculcates the desired values in her citizenry, Nigeria desires and should equip her education system to utilize her position in Africa to engender peace between her and other African countries as well as within and among other Africa countries. Therefore, the statements in the NPE (2004), are not only a desire but should be pursued vigorously. They include:

1. Nigeria desires to live in unity and harmony as one indivisible and indissoluble democratic sovereign nation founded on the principles of freedom, equality and justice.
2. To promote inter-African solidarity and world peace through understanding among others.

These appear to be the needs of Nigeria around which subjects should be introduced into the curriculum.

On general education of the citizenry, Nigeria is yet to achieve 70% literacy rate. The launching of the Universal Basic Education (UBE, 2004), which geared towards promoting literacy rate is a step in the right direction but negated when in practice, the question of access is not addressed. How can we justify that Nigeria is giving equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens even with the UBE, which is supposed to make Primary Education and Junior Secondary Education free and compulsory, while within the same Nigeria, there is a preponderance of private schools starting from the pre-primary level to tertiary level. In fact, I need some help or should I say some explanation to enable me understand how variation in fees ranging from N2, 000.00 – N100, 000.00 per term in primary schools and N3, 000.00 to about N350, 000.00 per term for secondary schools and N30, 000.00 to N350, 000.00 per semester for universities translates to equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens in Nigeria.

If my opinion is any thing to go by, the Nigerian Constitution (1979), gives the right of child education to the parents and the Child Rights Act (2003) supports same. If a parent therefore, has a right to choose the school to which he sends his child and the decision of the type of school depends on the parents pocket, I do not see how Nigeria will achieve equal access. The 21st century has this issue as a ~~great challenge~~ ahead of it. Something drastic must be done to reduce the disparity in educational opportunities among Nigerian children except Nigerian Educational System intends to promote class distinction. Meanwhile, the guiding document of Nigerian Educational System places the following as imperatives for Nigerian education to achieve:

- a. A free and democratic society.
- b. A just and egalitarian society.
- c. A united, strong and self-reliant nation.
- d. A great and dynamic economy
- e. A land full of bright opportunities for all citizens.

With the observed disparity in opportunity and consequent achievement, the listed goals may never be achieved.

The occurrences in the present day Nigeria where a seat in an elected position is fought for

with blood and when achieved guarded very jealously may be described as a social ill but to me, it is a direct result of the disparity of educational opportunities. Citizens see arriving at an electoral post as a means of self-mobilization from his previous position to a more advantageous one and a change in his social class.

Justice in many circumstances have been evaded and the social system promotes survival of the fittest when the fittest may mean strongest in terms of weaponry, thuggery, tricks and falsehood. Undoubtedly, Nigeria is a land full of opportunities for all citizens but the present education system, which does not place all children on the same pedestal, allows for the opportunities to be first for people of privileged birth who have also used the opportunities wisely, before the remainder can reach the not-so-lucky ones. The 21st century has to address this also.

According to Bellani (2004), the events of September 11, 2003 and the battle against terrorists around the globe have occupied much of worlds headline attention and soaked up resources that could have been devoted to human development. Yet all these countries avow to sparing no efforts to free men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty to which more than a million people all over the globe are currently subject to. Nigeria has her toll of poverty which education as observed by Heyneman (1983), is the only tool to be used towards its eradication. This fight against terrorism may be affecting Nigeria in more ways than one. Significant among the ways, is the increase of allocation of oil and the rise in oil price which is an advantage to Nigeria. Realizing that education is a potent tools towards eradication of poverty, should Nigeria not use this advantage to reposition education in the country? Instead, the education system is a plagued with poor funding, dilapidating equipment and on payment of functionaries entitlements. These on their own translate to non-commitment of functionaries to the sector which give rise to other plagues such as examination malpractice, certificate fraud and general mediocrity.

The general society reaping from the failure of education witnesses armed robbery, dishonesty of all types, greed, laziness and absolute lack of patriotism. The worst scenario is the political arena. Within this political sphere, one witnesses, thuggery, assassination, blackmail and embezzlement pf public funds.

Apart from the above, there are challenges of the curriculum not training people for job needs in the country. This has brought about massive unemployment and underemployment in the country.

As I was addressing adolescent on positioning themselves for advancements in the 21st century, the following challenges of the century came to the fore:

- Technological advancement to which both young and old must apply themselves.
- Parental education so that they do not turn the hand of the clock in the reverse direction.
- Teachers are not as knowledgeable as the students they teach in certain aspects of education thereby creating the need for remodeling teacher education. The teacher needs to be a guide in the 21st century and not pose as the custodian of knowledge as used to be the case. This same phenomenon raises the issue of retraining of teachers to meet the exigencies of the century.
- Actual studying for knowledge sake has been played down by both educators and students such that immediate utility of any knowledge acquired is required before engaging in it at all.
- There is also stiff competition in the job market such that only the best can get employed (on merit) to the very few spaces available.
- Insecurity arising from fraudsters, 419 activities and rich quick syndrome.
- Individualization in almost everything.
- Human trafficking where children and young adults are lured into slavery and their forms

- of abuse. This has its effect on education and the general attitude of the people.
- HIV/AIDS gradually removing the active generation of the society. More children lacking sponsors and government reluctance to finance education to the fullest.
- Cultism in educational institutions which constitute a diversionary tendency among youths.

Imperatives for the 21st Century

Jegede (2007), notes that, education as at today, the beginning of the 21st century, is a disaster. One may wonder why he should feel this way. The simple reason is that education is not fulfilling the purpose for which it is meant in the country. The next question which arises here from is, should we still hope on education to bring about a potent advancement in the 21st century?

Education from time has been seen as a vehicle of change (Osokoya, 1986, Onwuenyi, 1988 and Obinaju, 1992) in order to bring about solutions to challenging patterns of life. Pockets of solutions build up to national development. Education is therefore, very vital to a nation because it is the only source of national development. All what it requires is proper attention to the ingredients and implementation of the chosen system of education (Obinaju, 1999). The mistake we often make is to expect the result in a very short time frame (6 months, 1 year or 5 years). We often also quote the sum spent on education as huge; sums such as those used for payment of teachers' salaries, provision of equipment in schools, repair of classroom block and the like. No doubt, education is a huge burden but it is much better than the catastrophe of ignorance, illiteracy and innumeracy.

We also often judge the system of education as not potent within too short a time not minding whether we had implemented the tenets to the letter or not. This often leads us to frequent change system. We have had 7 5 2 3 system in the 1960's, 6 5 4 in the seventies and 6 - 3 - 3 - 4 of the eighties and nineties. Today, the 9-3-4 system of education is gradually being introduced with the onset of the Universal Basic Education. In this paper, I proposed a reversal to 6-3-3-4 with a compulsory addition of 2 pre-primary schools years to the 6 years of primary education. This would therefore, give us 8-3-3-4 system of education with each Nigerian child starting compulsory and free education at age 3.

Please let me hurry to say that each of the above systems of education can deliver sustainable national development in Nigeria if there is sincerity of purpose. Education for the 21st century must therefore be seen to be driven by sincere motives. These include what we would term imperatives for the 21st century education if we are to achieve sustainable national development.

The government of Nigeria must assume full responsibility for the education of its citizens. This implies that there must be adequate funding and judicious use of the funds provided. On budgetary issues, the nation should respect the UN recommendation that the least to be provided for education is 26% of the total budget for the nation at a given time. Moreover, schools have to be properly funded, equipped; teachers properly remunerated to reduce the desire and the excuses teachers often make to extort money from students thereby giving opportunity for the following:

- The teacher diverting his attention from what he should be doing (sincere teaching) to setting traps for money.
- Students believing that even if one does not study, one can always have a good grade depending on how much one is ready to part with.
- The attendant mediocrity as a result of improper teaching and study habits.
- There also must be equal access of all citizens to a free, compulsory schools. If all citizens attend the same types of schools at all levels, there would be increased commitment to the system. Furthermore, narrowing the disparity in the mould of

education would give children of both poor and rich parents equal opportunity. This will allow for only the best to emerge for opportunities which abound in Nigeria not the best among the upper class to the total neglect of the low and down trodden.

- As a matter of urgency, there should be expansion of schools to accommodate the teeming population of Nigerian citizens requiring education. By expansion the actual establishment of pre-primary classes in existing primary schools as provided for by the National Policy on Education (2004), is implied. Looking at the scenario, the primary section (as a school) will be too bogus if it, in addition provides for the equivalent of JS 1 –3 within its sector. This calls for an immediate reversal of the current move to attach JSS 1 –2 to primary schools all in the name of Basic Education.
- The 21st century should pursue the actualization of Citizenship Education where the character of the taught would be a more important consideration. Citizenship Education would among other things educate citizens to feel, act and respond primarily as citizens of the country taking into consideration the country's needs, aspirations and goals (Obinaju, 2006). In Citizenship Education also, the need for survival of the country would override personal interests. Methods should desensitize citizens from intolerance, injustice, hatred, laziness, lack of co-operation, disregard for individual rights and property, disobedience to law and the like. These would make for national integration and sustainable development.
- In content, education for the 21st century cannot leave out Environmental Education where an enriched curriculum with an interdisciplinary approach would equip the Nigerian with the ingredients of preservation of the present for maximal exploitation while at the same time providing for the future.
- There is need for massive education of all citizens in information and communication technology (ICT) so that all may go in line with the exigencies of the time. In particular there is need for retraining of teachers in this direction.
- Nigeria should re-position all machineries to ensure the achievement of the Millennium Development (MDGS) and EFA goals by 2015. Thereafter, what the 21st century would be doing would be to maintain the system and ensure improvement of the structures.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have noted that education is a potent means to national sustainable development. We have reviewed educational development in Nigeria from the pre-colonial years to the present. We have noted that the present decadence in the society is as a result of the failure of the present system of education to train citizens in worthwhile content and non-commitment to the course of education.

Today, there has been so much talk about sustainable development that it would be correct to say that education for today and the future (21st century) should be for sustainable development. The only way of bringing this about is to train the citizenry to achieve the needs of the nation. In the case of Nigeria, several challenges have enumerated. These challenges are solely on the education system to either correct or promote them by way of practice in the country. Putting lofty clauses in the policy documents may not bring the desired change but sincerity of purpose and actual commitment of all the course of education is the only solution. Citizenship and Environmental Education as prescribed by Obinaju (2006), would train for patriotism which is the starting point of re-orientation of the citizenry from the challenges of the present day.

By way of specific recommendations, proper funding equal access, ICT awareness, retraining

of teachers, achievement of the Millennium Development (MDGS) and Education for All (EFA) goals in the soonest possible time would go a long way to help reposition education for the 21st century.

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