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Whither Nigeria's Education?

In nearly 2013, a primary four arithmetic and basic literacy test was administered to 1,599 teachers in Kaduna State. Upon reviewing the results, only 1 teacher scored above 75%. 298 scored between 50% and 75% while 1,300 i.e. 81% of the teachers teaching basic education and wrote the test did not pass it. In 2014, the Edo State Government was the subject of major backlash from the Nigerian Union of Teachers because it attempted to conduct a competency test for teachers in the state.

The government has embarked on activities to integrate the estimated 10.5 million children who do not attend school in Nigeria as well as made efforts towards developing a safe schools initiative, especially for the North East sub-region. However, education standards appear to be on the decline, evidenced by the uncompetitive graduates, unemployable youths and narrow-minded individuals turned out by our tertiary institutions annually. We focus on certificates, which have little value and are unacceptable internationally. We sabotage meritocracy today for mediocrity, calling it many names, and are likely to end up in kakistocracy, given that government is by the people. Government spending on the education sector has not translated to good quality and it behooves us as citizens to discuss potential solutions to the crisis in this sector.

What are we learning?

Our current system of education is based on the national policy, which allocates nine years to basic education. It is expected that all children will have access to and obtain basic education irrespective of gender, creed, tribe and location. The basic education curriculum includes compulsory subjects such as Mathematics, English, Science, Art, Religion, Social Studies, Computer Studies and Physical Education. It is comparable to the British curriculum which offers similar subjects except religion, which is substituted for Music. At the basic level, children are expected to read, write and comprehend basic subjects as preparation for more specialized competencies. A review of the national curriculum for basic education does not reveal significant deficiencies though its application and the delivery of this curriculum appear hampered.

At senior secondary school level, the system focuses on preparing children to take national examinations after three years, rather than a mastery of subject areas or the application of knowledge gained. I sat with a 15 year old friend of mine, who recently transferred from school in Lagos to Pennsylvania and she shared with me how subjects were taught so differently in her new high school. She compared her Art class in Lagos with its equivalent, Inter-visual, in Pennsylvania and explained how in the latter, the students sat in a circle with an object at the centre. Each child discussed this object based on their angle of view and perspective. It was significantly different from merely drawing the object and it incorporated the principles of perspective, application and communication. It ensured that all students in the class were engaged, involved and their opinions were heard. Our senior secondary program requires involvement, more attention to detail and the time and dedication of teachers for it to be successful.



THERE IS AN URGENT NEED TO REVAMP THE DELIVERY OF EDUCATION. STANDARDS FOR WHAT IS REQUIRED TO BECOME A TEACHER MUST BE REVIEWED AND THE MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS TO ENTER COLLEGES OF EDUCATION MUST BE INCREASED. THESE COLLEGES ALSO REQUIRE URGENT ATTENTION TO MAKE THEM CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE. EDUCATION PROGRAMS AT UNIVERSITIES SHOULD NOT BE DUMPING SITES FOR THOSE WHO DO NOT GET ADMITTED INTO CORE PROGRAMS

At the tertiary level, our focus appears to be on absorbing theory and too little time is spent on the application of these theories. Students buy handouts and spend their time going to revision classes before exams, as the focus of their education is on writing examinations and obtaining a certificate. This is in stark contrast to reputable institutions abroad which depend on case studies and conduct open-book examinations. Before my first open book examination, I wondered how a Professor could boldly tell us to feel free to bring all our books to the exam or even create cheat-sheets ahead. What I realized during the examination, was that it was never going to be about definitions but about understanding and application of concepts, and it was a waste of time trying to open or copy from books.

How are we learning?

Education has existed in various forms since early recorded history. Man has demonstrated the need to pass down traditions, culture, know-how,

legends, rituals, songs and the like to his offspring. What has changed over time is the methods of education, the tools used in its delivery and the breadth of possibilities.

We live in a digital age where toddlers operate iPads and smart phones with ease; one where students can take pictures of boards and convert to text rather than take physical notes and one where young people are bold enough to question the status quo. We have access to the internet and a plethora of information at the click of a button, yet our methods of delivering education in Nigeria have failed to reflect these advancements. Libraries globally are going digital, students are moving away from a dependence on paper and schools are leveraging technology to deliver lessons but this is scarcely the case here.

Students are the products of their teachers and where these teachers cannot pass basic tests, one must wonder what the expectations should be of students. We depend on inadequately trained, poorly remunerated and obsolete teachers to train our students. Many teachers enter the teaching profession because they have no other place to go. Their motivation is hinged on their need to make a living rather than a passion to impact young minds, which explains why selling handouts and offering revision kits become the high points of the school year. I have seen children who start off speaking well at home and then attend school to suddenly develop terrible accents. I have also heard about children in public schools who contribute money for invigilators to allow them to cheat and the differences in scores only come from the students' divergent ability to copy accurately.

Our educational system over-emphasise examinations rather than learning and sadly, these assess only a limited faculty. Life is about perspective and responses to questions depend on assumptions made, so the current way of assessing ones ability is restrictive. It portrays a single solution to a problem i.e. the multiple choice theory that only one in five answers is correct. This is not reality today, as very few answers are completely wrong.

Technical and vocational schools today resemble extensions of poorly funded high schools and have no equipment to train students. They offer no diversity to the attendees and archaic methods of instruction. They do not reflect advancements in Technology, Art or Science and are mere shadows of the purpose for which they were instituted.

What can be done to revive the system?

1. Reprioritize the sector

The World Bank sampled twenty countries in 2012 and compared their annual budgetary allocation to education. This study found that amongst the sample, Nigeria allocated the least proportion of its budget to education i.e. 8.4% as compared with others such as Ghana (31%), South Africa (25.8%), Kenya (23%), UAE (22.5%) and USA (17.1%).

It is incredible that there is still no substantive Minister for Education in Nigeria today, yet we are all aware of the dire straits of the sector and its numerous challenges, which range from insecurity to poor quality. The government must invest more money in education and channel such funding to areas of impact. It must pay attention to the sector

and overhaul the Federal Ministry to ensure that schools are closely supervised and the quality of education is monitored. It must review the national curriculum, especially for tertiary institutions, to ensure that this keeps pace with the modern world and focuses more on applying knowledge rather than cramming definitions.

2. Focus on the delivery – teacher and technology

There is an urgent need to revamp the delivery of education. Standards for what is required to become a teacher must be reviewed and the minimum requirements to enter Colleges of Education must be increased. These Colleges also require urgent attention to make them centres of excellence. Education programs at Universities should not be dumping sites for those who do not get admitted into core programs.

There must be a more rigorous method of recruiting teachers to public schools and a deliberate effort to train and retrain them. Teachers must keep pace with current trends in their field of study and seek to pass on education that is most relevant for today. The compensation of teachers must reflect the expected quality and it must become glorious once again to be called a 'teacher'. The education sector must become attractive to bright minds and must employ only top quality to stop the hemorrhaging in value.

In addition, we must integrate the use of technology in delivering lessons. At rural public schools in poor countries such as Nepal, students have access to tablets and PCs and rely on these for their daily education. Various technology firms in Nigeria have developed inexpensive tablets and we must find creative ways of introducing these to public schools. Language labs are essential to ensure that children, especially those in rural communities learn what such languages sound like and can imitate.

3. Reposition vocational training as an alternative to formal degrees

Everyone possesses specific talents which must be nurtured and leveraged in order to contribute adequately to society. Unfortunately, the disproportionate emphasis that society places on degrees and diplomas is forcing people to seek these at all cost. Statistics from the Federal Ministry of education reveal that only about 10% of all those who attend primary school eventually enroll at tertiary institutions locally. If we assume that another 10% go abroad then we have 80% of the student who do not attend tertiary institutions. Other-collar jobs, beyond white, such as green – agriculture, blue – construction must be promoted to restore dignity to hard work irrespective of status. Strong economies like Germany built themselves on technical and vocational training and so can we. Let us revive vocational and technical schools and promote their usage to create good standards, employable youth and competitive / exportable labour.

There is an urgency to revive the education sector and we must correctly define a greater path for Nigeria's education.

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