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SECONDARY EDUCATION IN TRANSITION IN NIGERIA: THE QUESTION OF QUALITY

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ABSTRACT

The paper traced the history of the development of secondary education in Nigeria since its inception in 1859. The paper noted the emphasis on traditional art and science subjects in the past and the innovations that have been brought into the secondary school curricula by the National Policy on Education published in 1977, but revised in 1981 and 1998. The problems of implementing the curricula were briefly mentioned. The paper finally highlighted steps that could be taken to improve the quality of secondary education, such as provision of physical and material resources, adequate financing of education, teacher training and development, improvement of the conditions of service for teachers and supervision of instruction, among others.

Introduction

Concerns have been expressed about the failure of a large number of students in the Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE) each year. In order to meet their future aspirations and to reduce the failure rate, some unscrupulous students engage in examination

malpractices.

It has been noted that if students are adequately prepared for examinations, the incidence of cheating will be quite reduced. However, a number of happenings in secondary schools provide evidence that all is not well with the system.

In the following sections, the paper therefore examines the development in secondary education since its inception and briefly reviews the innovations that have been brought into its curricula by the National Policy of Education. Some of the problems of implementing the curricula are also briefly highlighted. The paper also considers the steps that can be taken to improve the quality of the secondary school system.

History of Secondary Education

The Church Missionary Society (C.M.S) Grammar School, Lagos, established in 1859, was the first secondary school in Nigeria. Other

missionary groups came on board to establish their own secondary schools after the pioneering efforts of the Church Missionary Society. In 1909, the government founded Kings College, Lagos. This marked the beginning of government's ownership of secondary schools in Nigeria.

The curriculum was British in nature and most subjects emphasised the need to develop the intelligence of the students instead of orientating them toward their future career aspirations. The history and geography of Britain dominated teaching in these subject areas.

When the Universal Primary Education (UPE) Scheme was introduced in the Western Region in 1955, it became imperative for the regional government to widen access to secondary education. It was for this reason that the Western Regional Government copied the British secondary modern school system, which was of three years' duration. Subjects like agriculture, woodwork, metal work, domestic science, needlework and housekeeping were included in the curriculum (Taiwo, 1980).

The modern schools were criticised by the Banjo Commission, which was set up to review the educational

system in the Western Region, on the grounds that they provided an education which was inferior to that in secondary grammar schools although the teachers had the same qualification with primary school teachers (Ejiogu, 1986).

It is because of the inadequacies of the secondary grammar and secondary modern schools that the establishment of comprehensive secondary schools was advocated. The first Comprehensive High school was established at Ayetoro in the Western Region in 1963. The school offered the traditional Arts and Science subjects, Economics, Accounting, Typing and Shorthand, Business Methods, Cookery, Needlework, Applied Electronics, Metal Work, Technical Drawing and Fine Art (Ejiogu, 1986). The intention was to provide secondary education with bias for technical subjects. However, inadequate qualified teachers, funds and equipment affected the running of the school.

The National Policy on Education (NPE) published in 1977, but revised in 1981 and 1998, provides uniform structure for secondary education throughout the country. Secondary education is now given in two stages: junior and senior secondary, each lasting a period of three years. In addition to

Mathematics, English, Nigerian Languages, Integrated Science, Social Studies, Art and Music, Religious and Moral Instruction and Physical Education, the junior secondary school curriculum also contains pre-vocational subjects such as Woodwork, Metalwork, Electronics, Mechanics, Local Crafts, Home Economics, Business Studies and non-vocational electives (Arabic Studies and French). After this stage, graduates who do not proceed to the senior secondary stage or other post-primary institutions such as technical colleges can go into apprenticeship training or enrol in out-of-school vocational training centres.

The senior secondary school curriculum consists of core subjects like English Language; a Nigerian Language; Mathematics; one of Physics, Chemistry and Biology; one of Literature-in-English, History and Geography; and Agriculture or a vocational subject. Students can select from vocational subjects like Metalwork, Electronics, Technical Drawing, Woodwork and Auto-mechanics. The idea is to make graduates of senior secondary schools immediately employable.

However, inadequate funding, lack of qualified teachers, equipment, teaching materials and workshops

(for vocational and technical subjects) have hampered the implementation of the secondary school curriculum. It is these and other problems that have caused the high failure rate in the Senior Secondary Certificate Examinations. A relevant question at this stage is: how can we improve the quality of the secondary school system?

The next section, therefore, focuses on steps that can be taken to improve the quality of secondary education in Nigeria.

Improving the Quality of Secondary Education in Nigeria

This section discusses issues which could help in improving the quality of secondary education. These include provision of material and physical resources, financing of secondary education, teacher training and staff development, conditions of service for teachers, supervision of instruction, school administration, parents/teachers associations, students' evaluation, guidance and counselling and discipline.

Provision of Physical and Material Resources

Most public schools urgently need materials, equipment, physical facilities, and tools for an effective

teaching-learning process and to improve the productivity of teachers.

It should be noted that the aims of secondary education include preparation for useful living within the society and preparation for higher education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1998). It is believed that if students take subjects like Electronics, Metalwork, Woodwork, Auto-Mechanics, Home Economics and the like and combine this education with some form of apprenticeship training, they could be self-employed. Where a student opts for higher education, and specializes in any professional course urgently needed by the country, then our attempts at realising national development will be fully fulfilled. Unfortunately, most public schools are ill equipped to execute their mandate. A number of studies (Ojoawo, 1990; Ibukun, 1992; Mbipom 1992; Bamkefa, 1994) have shown that these basic requirements for the instructional process are not adequate in most public schools at the state level.

Although these research findings were obtained a few years ago, the situation has not changed significantly in most public secondary schools up till today. Perhaps, those pupils in Model

Colleges and Federal Government College are luckier than their counterparts in State schools in this regard. This is because the former have better facilities and other educational resources than the latter. Educational achievements of pupils in these two environments are often different. This calls to question our desire to promote a just and egalitarian society.

It is therefore suggested that the public school system be rehabilitated. The rehabilitation should involve construction of decent and conducive classrooms, laboratories, libraries and workshops. Educational materials needed in schools should also be provided. The idea of refurbishing an insignificant number of schools by the defunct Petroleum Trust Fund will not improve the situation.

Financing of Secondary Education

The grossly inadequate funding of education has exacerbated the poor condition of the public secondary school system. It has been remarked that developing countries like Nigeria still spend lower percentages of their Gross National Product (GNP) on education than most developed countries (World Bank, 1988). Even though the World Bank study was conducted

in 1988, the situation today remains the same as that obtained in 1988. Unfortunately, the inadequate funds devoted to education are sometimes mismanaged or spent on wasteful projects. Schools are not given sufficient funds to cover recurrent expenditures. It is a common knowledge that most school principals are not involved in budgeting. It therefore becomes difficult to determine the actual needs of the schools. Everything depends on the judgement of the officials of the Ministry of Education.

It is not surprising that the basic needs of schools are never met, since those who are supposed to give useful information in the budgetary process are alienated. Proper budgeting which involves estimation of the recurrent and capital expenditures on education and identification of the sources of revenue to finance education has become necessary if schools will not continue to suffer from inadequate funding. Principals must of necessity be involved in budgeting in schools. Government and parents also need to increase their financial support for the school system. Proceeds from the Education Tax and part of the earnings from the Value Added Tax could be utilized to salvage secondary education.

Teacher Training and Staff Development

It is true that Nigeria has made considerable progress in enhancing the quality of teachers in the primary and secondary schools. At least most schools have a good number of qualified teachers on roll. However, the preparation of these qualified teachers by institutions of higher learning should be improved upon. In recent years, and as a result of incessant closure of colleges and universities, some teacher-trainees have not had sufficient professional training. A good number of sandwich and other part-time teacher training programmes are badly packaged and delivered to clients. Public agencies like the National Universities Commission (NUC) and National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) need to focus more attention on how these part-time programmes are run. Their concern should not be on full-time programmes alone since those enrolled for part-time programmes are also produced for the nation's education system. A closely related problem is lack of meaningful support for on-the-job staff development programmes. Most teachers engage in in-service training programmes without much support from their employers. What of those teachers who embark

on programmes not related to the teaching profession? Such people merely see the teaching profession as a stopgap.

Therefore, improvements need to be made in the professional preparation of teachers by ensuring that colleges of education and universities run their full academic calendars, include more course units of teaching subjects and attract quality candidates to teacher training programmes. The NUC and NCCE should collaborate with universities and colleges of education respectively to overhaul part-time teacher education programmes. Teachers should be encouraged to attend conferences, workshops and seminars. The Ministry of Education should draw up guidelines of staff development programmes. Because some teachers embark on programmes not related to teaching, the guidelines should focus on choices available to teachers, for example eligibility criteria (number of years a teacher must put in to qualify for study leave), duration of study leave, leave entitlements, promotion prospects after undergoing higher professional training, to mention a few.

Conditions of Service for Teachers

It is apparent that the conditions of service for teachers still need improvement. Because of unattractive salaries paid to teachers at all levels, dedication, commitment and loyalty have been eroded. Teachers are not given their due respect because of poverty written on their faces. Little wonder that some teachers have now diversified their sources of income. Some of them are successful traders today. They even advertise their goods and services during school hours! Definitely, this does not augur well for the education system. Conditions of service need to be improved to ensure teachers' commitment to the profession. Opportunities must be given to deserving teachers to advance on-the-job by considering hard working teachers for promotion as and when due. Those who have acquired higher professional qualifications since joining the profession should be credited for this when considering teachers for promotion. Years of teaching experience should not be the only yardstick for promoting secondary school teachers. Teachers are only saying that they should be treated

as human beings. They want to live a decent life during and after meritorious service.

Supervision of Instruction

The Principal and his assistants like vice-principals and heads of departments need to give sufficient time to the supervision of the instructional process. Because of their rich experience, they can assist their subordinates to improve on their performance. In some instances, one finds unpardonable mistakes in the lesson notes of teachers. This shows the kind of supervision that is conducted by those who have authority to do so. Teachers need to be informed about the benefits of instructional supervision because some teachers resent being supervised by internal or external supervisors. Such teachers should be told that nobody has monopoly of wisdom. They can therefore gain from the suggestions of their super-ordinates and peers. It is a common knowledge that supervisors from the Ministry of Education do not have adequate time to supervise teachers in the classroom. Hence, the need for within-school supervision conducted by the principal and other instructional leaders. Supervisors within the school can provide the professional assistance that teachers need in the choice

of instructional materials, methods of instruction and textbooks; organisation of content into meaningful units; writing of lesson notes, among others. The Ministry of Education should provide vehicles and other materials so that the staff of the Inspectorate Division can perform their roles effectively.

School Administration

The administration of secondary schools of today can no longer be reduced to rule-of-thumb. There is therefore the need for the Federal and State Ministries of Education to give premium to the training of school principals. Secondary Schools are becoming increasingly complex. Hence, the school system needs managers who understand the procedures for motivating, leading and developing subordinates. Principals need some rudiments of administration to ensure that staff do their work and to promote effectiveness of the school system. A principal requires the knowledge of personnel needs in the work place, the assumptions that have been made about the nature of humanity, principles of administration, process of communication, school business management and public relations practices, to mention a few.

Unfortunately, some school administrators are autocratic, wasteful spenders and visionless. Perhaps, the Ministry of Education and its relevant agencies need to conduct selection interviews for secondary school administrators, as it is done in tertiary educational institutions. Selection of school principals needs not be based solely on years of teaching experience. To be effective and efficient, principals would need the cooperative efforts of students, staff, parents and other stakeholders. The school system needs only those who understand the business of managing people and resources to achieve the goals of education.

Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs)

Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) should be encouraged to contribute to the development of secondary education. It is gratifying to note that the PTA has been assigned specific roles in the management of education in some states like Lagos. The 1982 Guidelines published by the Lagos State Government recognized, for instance, the need for the PTA to be involved in the provision of financial support to schools, fostering harmonious relationship

between the home and the school, maintenance of discipline at home and at school, by ensuring, for example, that parents provide the educational materials needed by children (lack of educational materials can cause indiscipline among students).

Many schools, however, do not have vibrant PTAs, because of the attitude of the school administrators, and parents, and the harsh economic conditions that have made things difficult for some parents. School administrators, in conjunction with the PTA executives, need to coordinate the activities of the association so that it (association) can assist with the provision of school facilities and materials to enhance learning situations. Parents should be encouraged to visit schools to promote interaction between the home and the school. During such visits the problems that confront a school can be explained to parents. Such forum can also be used to ensure that parents and teachers are not working across purposes. PTA meetings can also be used to inform and guide parents on how to meet their children's educational needs. Several advantages can be reaped if school authorities develop good rapport with parents through the PTA.

Students' Evaluation, Guidance and Counselling

Secondary Schools should encourage the use of continuous assessment procedures to evaluate pupils' achievement. Although the National Policy on Education emphasises that the Junior School Certificate will be based on continuous assessment and examination conducted by State and Federal Examinations Boards, this is hardly the case in a number of States. Statewide examinations are still conducted at that level to measure pupils' achievement. Because of the high student population, many teachers fail to give adequate number of tests, projects and exercises to evaluate pupils' learning. The effects of this include poor study habits on the part of students, poor performance in final examinations and inability to cover all aspects of the syllabus when assessing students' achievement.

For continuous evaluation of students' achievement to be carried out in secondary schools, teachers need to be given orientation courses in the conduct of continuous assessments. The results of these assessments should be used to guide students in the choice of subjects. Most of the factors inhibiting students' performance can be redressed if the school authorities

are vigilant. Unfortunately, some principals place more premium on teaching subjects on the curriculum than on counselling. Such principals force Guidance Counsellors to teach some subjects instead of performing their primary duty. This situation should be reversed by ensuring that Guidance Counsellors teach some subjects at a reduced rate and also devote some time to counselling. Necessary materials and facilities should be provided so that Counsellors can perform their roles satisfactorily.

Discipline

School objectives and goals cannot be achieved in an atmosphere where there is breakdown of law and order. Government, parents, school administrators, teachers and students need to cooperate to ensure discipline in the school system. Such vices like cultism, drug abuse, examination malpractices, etc. should be eradicated from the school system to achieve set goals. To eradicate cultism, students can be helped to get over any emotional problems they may have that can encourage them to join campus cults. Also, associations such as boys' scout, girls' brigade, etc. that have positive influence on students can be encouraged in schools, and moral and religious education can be promoted in schools. To prevent drug abuse among students, the

harmful effects of unprescribed drugs can be explained to them through health education. First Aid Boxes can also be kept in schools to ensure that pupils have access to drugs needed in emergency situations instead of patronizing Medicine Stores to buy unprescribed drugs.

Particularly worrisome in secondary schools today is the issue of examination malpractices. A situation where school personnel and parents encourage examination malpractices is appalling. The society itself needs a re-orientation because the occurrence of examination malpractices (cheating) within the school system reflects the happenings within the larger society. Today, emphasis is placed on acquisition of material wealth. The young ones have learnt how to bribe their way through to obtain live question papers from officials of examination bodies who place emphasis on money above good name. School authorities should investigate cases of fraudulent practices in examination matters and punish culprits without delay. Officials of examination bodies found guilty of aiding cheating among students should be dismissed and made to face the full wrath of the law.

There is no doubt about the fact

that the Nigerian society needs rejuvenation to address the issues of indiscipline, corruption in high and low places, and perverse values. Parents and teachers must show good examples to ensure discipline among students.

Conclusion

This paper does not claim that the issues discussed above are the only ones affecting the quality of secondary education in Nigeria. It has merely sensitised the stakeholders on the need to re-examine the school environment and proffer solutions to problems impeding the achievement of educational objectives. There is the need for concerted efforts among the interest groups in education, government, parents, school personnel, students and the society at large, so that set objectives can be attained. We should not watch helplessly as the educational system is plunged into a state of decadence.

The education of our youth is too important to be toyed with.

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