

TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMME AND THE TEACHING PROFESSION IN THE NEW MILLENIUM

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Abstract

It is an accepted fact that no nation can rise above the quality of its teachers. This paper therefore highlights some ingredients that would enhance the professional training of the Nigerian teacher. This includes continued updating of the teacher so that he can keep pace with recent innovations in our technological age. The paper also critically examined the current Pivotal Teacher Training Programme and recommended that products of the scheme should not be engaged to dispense teaching responsibilities until they have attained the minimum qualification for teaching - the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE).

Introduction

Education, the world over, whether in primitive or civilized society, is a highly esteemed social service. This is true of Nigeria where it is recognized as the gateway to success in our efforts to develop the human and material resources of the country. No doubt, the education industry serves as • the foundation on which the social, economic, political and technological development of any nation rests. In fact, it is conceptualized as the panacea for all the ills of the Nigerian society, ranging from the problems of creating national awareness as well as forging unity and harmony among the people. The National Policy on Education (1998) simply puts it thus "education is an instrument for national development..." It is in the light of its prime role that the three strata of government as well as parents commit huge financial resources to educational development and expansion.

In spite of this effort, however, not much has yet been achieved in terms of social, political, economic, and technological development. Nigeria is still plagued with high scale poverty, ignorance, disease, indiscipline of all shades and at all levels, inefficiency, disunity, and scientific and technological backwardness. This scenario can be explained from the fact that no education system can serve as an instrument of nation building until those who plan and administer both the nation and its education system recognize the central role of teachers in the educative process. The federal government seemed to have realized this fact when she noted in the National Policy on Education (1998) that: since no education system will rise above the quality of its teacher, teacher education shall continue to be given major emphasis in all educational planning and development.

It further declared that "All teachers in educational institutions shall be professionally trained". It must be stressed that if the objectives of education are to be fully achieved, good quality teachers will be needed to handle our educational programmes. They should be teachers who are current and will be able to design an educational system that will take into account changes in the world in the relationship of nations to one another.

Current Status of Teacher Education

By way of recapitulation, the first teacher training college in Nigeria was established in 1856 at Abeokuta by the Church Missionary Society (CMS). One hundred and twenty years later, the number had risen to 250 teacher training colleges with nearly 13,000 student teachers. By the 1980/81 session, enrolment into teacher training colleges had risen to over 263,000 student teachers. The above figures show a steady emphasis on teacher education. This situation is consequent upon the launching of the Universal Primary Education Scheme (UPE) in 1976 and the free education¹ programme of the second republic. However, with the termination of the second republic in 1984 by the Buhari/Idiagbon military regime, most of the teacher training colleges were shut down. Right now, there seems to be a resurgence of the boom in teacher education programme of the pre-Idiagbon/Buhari era. There exist many Pivotal Teacher Training Programme (PTTP) outlets in towns and villages all over the federation with over 500,000 student teachers in them. Quite a good number of them have just passed out awaiting appointment and subsequent posting to our primary schools. This project was conceived to meet the staffing need of the Universal Basic Education

(UBE) of the current civilian administration. It should be observed in passing that the two programmes UPE and UBE are offspring of the same father - President Oiusegun Obasanjo. The two programmes made education compulsory and free up to a certain level. The UBE transcends the UPE in the sense that while the latter made education compulsory and free up to primary level, the UBE programme extends free and compulsory education up to the end of the junior secondary. It should be realized that the Nigeria Certificate in Education has been made as a matter of policy to be the minimum teaching qualification for those who wish to make a career in teaching (NPE, 1998:33). To this end, a lot of Colleges of Education, Institutes of Education, National Teachers' Institute and Faculties of Education in most Nigerian Universities have been producing a large number of professionally trained non-graduate and graduate teachers to feed our primary and secondary schools. It is thus difficult to understand the place of the Weekend Pivotal Programme for the training of Grade II teachers. The PTPP programme can only be relevant if it is conceived as the first professional training experience of would-be teachers who would immediately transit into the Colleges of Education or their equivalent to obtain the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE), which is the minimum qualification for entering into the profession.

The Nigerian Teacher Today

It is sad to recount the ordeals and dehumanizing experiences that the Nigerian teachers went through in the recent past. They represented the wretched of the earth and the endangered specie of our polity. Indeed, it was a curse to be a teacher until very recently, thanks to President Obasanjo's foresightedness. The Nigerian teacher has never had it so good. The euphoria of the new salary scale has blinded the teachers to the many other benefits and entitlements accruing to them as public servants. Indeed, the Nigerian teacher is yet to arrive at the promised land.

The present situation is not yet too far from the picture painted by Igborgbor (2000):

Government in practical terms treats teachers as an unpleasant burden that must be borne in order to keep the schools going. All you hear from government are pretentious verbalizations of regard and support for teachers. In practical terms, teachers' salaries are delayed or withheld on the flimsiest of excuses; they do not enjoy such fringe benefits as free medical services. They cannot even make transport claims if they travel. Their promotions are irregular and when they are released a year or more after, they are announced as special acts of benevolence on the part of the government.

In the light of this situation, he suggested that the government must first determine to treat teachers just like every other worker in the public service. According to him, this is one way we can return teachers both in body and spirit to the school.

The Way Forward for the Teaching Profession

It is not the intention of this paper to delve into the worn-out controversy as to whether teaching is a profession or not. However, it is sad to note that up till now, the professional quality of those who are given responsibility to impart knowledge is far from standard. Many assume instructional responsibilities without ever having to acquire basic pedagogical principles or certification from any professional school. This situation has to stop. Nigerian education has come of age. Nobody who is unlicensed (by non-possession of the minimum teaching qualification - the NCE) should be engaged in the classroom as a teacher. The politically motivated appointment of engineers, accounting graduates, sociologists, geologists, estate surveyors, to mention but a few at the expense of our teeming NCE and education graduate teachers who now roam our streets unemployed must stop!

The idea of employing before professionalizing should also stop if teaching should rightly maintain its place in the committee of professions. We should not throw the door too wide for misfits, the unmotivated and the rejects from other life endeavours to dispense instructional service to our children. There is no justification for the continued retention of unqualified persons to engage in teaching. And to borrow from Nwagwu's (1984) slogan eighteen years ago, "be trained and licensed before being recruited as a teacher". The other professions such as the medical, the legal and the engineering do not engage the untrained to render their service no matter how short in supply they may be. The authors commend the tacit recognition of "teaching as a legally recognized profession" and the soon take off the Teachers' Registration Council (NPE, 1998). We strongly recommend that this project be implemented without any delay and with all the

vigour it deserves. When fully implemented, no "teacher" who is not registered should be allowed to "teach" even in the private schools in the country.

To ensure that this is implemented, we recommend that no unlicensed person should be appointed to preside over the education industry as either as minister or commissioner in Nigeria.

Principals of schools (under the umbrella ANCOPS) should make it a policy to stop accepting unprofessional graduate teachers who are politically appointed and posted to their schools. This must be adhered to no matter how desperate they are in getting enough teachers in certain subject matter areas.

Finally, one would like to reiterate the earlier position held that the army of about 500,000 strong pivotal students being prepared for the UBE scheme across the nation is unacceptable. It is very sad that a nation that has set 1998 as a deadline for Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) to have become the minimum qualification for any teacher in the primary or secondary school is looking up to a much lower qualification. The teachers to be produced from such programmes are unlikely to be skillful, knowledgeable and have inspirational abilities. Professor Nicholas Nwagwu, in an inaugural lecture as far back as 1984 at the University of Benin noted that;

The teaching profession in Nigeria will not attain a respectable status until we gradually phase out Grade II Teachers' Training Colleges and upgrade Teachers' Grade II Certificate holders, through in-service training at the level of NCE holders. This... should be planned with the year 2000 AD as the target deadline for its full implementation.

Two years after the projected deadline for the phasing out of the Grade II Teachers' Certificate as recommended by our learned professor, about half a million ex-school dropouts, iced fish sellers and road side mechanics are being hurriedly prepared to serve in the revered vocation of teaching across the nation. It is the opinion of the present authors that if the federal government wishes to increase the number of teachers for the UBE scheme, effort should be made to expand the already existing Colleges of Education as well as the Institutes and Faculties of Education in our Universities.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to show the important role teachers have to play in the provision of qualitative education for this country. This current status of teachers and the teaching profession was discussed. It was recommended that the practice of employing non-professionals into the teaching profession be discontinued. Also the idea of training Teacher Grade II Certificate holders through the pivotal scheme for the UBE programme of the present administration was considered inadequate for a high standard of teaching and learning.

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