SCHOOL PRINCIPALS AND NIGERIA’S TRANSFORMATION AGENDA IN GOMBE STATE

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Abstract

While pursuing the dual goals of being among the 20 largest economies in the world by 2020 and achieving the Millennium Development Goals, Nigeria must focus on the secondary school level which is an essential level between basic education and the tertiary institutions. Guided by the question: What can Principals do to contribute to the success of the Transformation Agenda?

the paper discusses the role of education, especially the secondary education in national development in general by drawing from the experiences of other countries. Then the basic essentials of the Transformation Agenda are highlighted to contextualize the discussion as well as the Gombe State Government’s policy on secondary education based on which there is an examination of the role of principals in the state in contributing to the success of the Transformation Agenda.

Keywords: Secondary school, principal, transformation, Gombe State

Introduction

Nigeria is aiming to be one of the 20 largest economies in the world by 2020 and at the same time is pursuing the objective of achieving the Millennium Development Goals. In the face of these challenges is the continuous fall in the quality of education as manifested in the massive failure of secondary school students in the national examinations, very limited number of admissions into tertiary institutions, general poor quality of products from all the levels of the educational system and massive unemployment.

For the country to get out of this quagmire, sort out its problems, try to catch-up and be one of the countries of the world with stable economies and democratic culture as envisaged in the Vision 20:2020, there is no doubt the need for transformation and a drastic one for that matter. The Transformation Agenda of the Federal Government is therefore welcomed and needs to be pursued with full commitment. However the success of the Agenda depends on a number of variables among which education is critical, if not the most critical of them. No country ever transformed nor will ever transform without a sound educational system. There is evidence that all developed countries and those that are now coming up like Brazil, India, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore etc have had to reform their educational system for decades before they reached where they are today.

Knowledge, secondary education and transformation

Generally the purpose of an educational system is that of educating and training young people who are equipped with solid knowledge and abilities, able to think creatively and act independently. It should educate and train fully developed personalities who unfold their abilities and talents for the good of the society, who can think and act as patriots, have a sense of community, love for work and readiness to defend the country (Glaessner; 1998). In the current situation in which the world is knowledge driven which has led to the emergence of what is called the global knowledge economy that drives the industrial and technological transformations in the world today, the pivotal position of education in transforming any society is indubitable. The secondary education level occupies an important and critical position in the set up of the educational system as a transitional stage between basic and tertiary education.

While universities and other tertiary education institutions are responsible for the education and training of the professional workforce, ideally the secondary schools are to caterer to the needs of educating and training middle-level technicians and skilled workers (Alam, 2009). Secondary schools are the link between basic education particularly
the primary schools and tertiary institutions. This is the level where students are prepared for admission to universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education and agriculture. Secondary schools are in essence the suppliers of admission materials to the tertiary institutions in this country, in fact all over the world. There is clear evidence that the industrialized nations and those that are now emerging achieved their growth and development by the intense attention they paid to secondary and tertiary education at certain stages of their development (de Ferranti, Perry, Gill, Guasch, Malony, Sanchez-Paramo and Schady; 2003).

A study (de Ferranti, Lederman, Maloney and Perry (2001) noted that one of the problems in Latin America and the Caribbean region is a large shortfall in secondary-educated workers which has affected two aspects of technological advancement like, having a narrow pool from which to select students for tertiary education and reduced the capacity for easy technological transition of the countries. This is because wide spread coverage of secondary education has been found to be a condition for countries to fully reap technological spillovers from Direct Foreign Investment (DFI) and trade (de Ferranti, 2003). Alam and Shahjamal (2008) concluded that one of the reasons for Bangladesh’s inability to participate in the technology-based global network economy is because the secondary and post-secondary failed to produce graduates with employable skills. These are issues common to Nigeria as in other African, Asian and Latin American countries.

History has shown that countries that pursued the policy of phased expansion of education first by expanding primary school and then secondary school enrolments were able to witness positive transformation (de Ferranti et al, 2003). The most successful episodes of educational upgrading were those by the United States between 1850 and 1950; Korea 1910-1940 and the Scandinavian countries since WW II. These countries followed the pattern of bottom-up upgrading by first building up basic education, then secondary education and finally the tertiary level.

It is evident that countries with low levels of education are caught in the trap of technological stagnation, low growth and low demand for education. Skills acquisition has been found to be one of the core requirements in technological advancement and the secondary level is a critical level in that process (de Ferranti, et al 2001 de Ferranti et al 2003; Alam and Shahjamal, 2008; Alam 2009; Charles, Chang and Aydhaya, 2001). Unfortunately in Nigeria the education sector in general has been left to rot. The secondary school level is worst affected where there is poor quality teaching with no skills acquisition integrated in the system therefore producing students who are neither here nor there. Even with the clear policy that secondary schools and infact the entire educational system will be geared to producing students with necessary skills for the economic development of the country (Ministry of Education; 200..), yet the required equipment, machineries, workshops and manpower to effect the idea were not provided.

The 6-3-3-4 system is supposed to have a strong element of lower and middle-levels technology in the education system, but unfortunately the skills acquisition aspect was completely neglected and the academic aspect was left to deteriorate and almost collapse. While the Transformation Agenda is a welcome idea, regrettably it has been conceived at a time when the educational system is down. The Agenda as a whole and the education sector aspect that the Transformation seek to change are in real problems and need serious commitment to address for the country to progress.

**Nigeria’s transformation agenda**

The Agenda is not a precisely defined list of targets or strategies but seems to be an acknowledgement of the need to change the way things are done in the country. It is by-and- large a commitment to pursue the Vision 2020 agenda and the Seven Point Agenda of late President Yar Adua. However, issues like tackling corruption, improving service delivery, improving the power sector, strengthening continuity, consistency and commitment in pursuing government plans, projects and budgets are some of clearly stated commitments of the regime. The government also pledged to fix critical sectors of the nation’s economy and evolve programmes that would accelerate the nation’s plan to becoming one of the 20 largest economies by 2020. The President also declared the regime’s intention of building an inclusive society where
every Nigerian would have equal access to economic and development opportunities. The Transformation Agenda is about reforming the economy, governance, power sector, security, job creation, infrastructure and all other aspects of the national life for the advancement of the country. The Agenda is more-or-less political statements and promises by the President. While these are not directly under the education sector but education is the foundation for any relevance and successes they may record.

The Agenda in respect to education was spelt out by the Minister of Education in July when, the Federal Ministry of Education directorate staff, Heads of parastatals and agencies, Vice Chancellors, Rectors, Provosts and Principals of Unity schools were addressed at a retreat in Abuja. The priority areas listed were:

1. Access and Equity
2. Standards and Quality
3. Technical and Vocational Education
4. Education and Training
5. Funding and Resource Mobilization
6. Strengthening of Institutional Management of Education
7. Teacher Education and Development

State governments will be expected to translate these into practice by adopting them to their peculiarities. All these were already in existence as the targets of the educational system therefore not much has changed except they are now to be pursued with more vigor. Unless the factors/obstacles that have prevented the realization of the earlier aspirations and expected outcomes or results of these targets are remedied the transformation agenda will remain a mirage like many other government programmes before. Nevertheless principals are therefore expected to be guided by these priority areas as interpreted in their various states in the management, administration and daily operations of their various schools.

Nothing can be transformed in the desired manner with illiteracy or half education therefore ultimately the education system is the engine of the transformation agenda. This reality poses daunting challenges to Principals especially considering the very unserious manner governments treat the education sector in this country. Budgetary allocations for education in this country have always been meager and even the little that is allocated is not released fully. Corruption, stealing and diversion of resources, lack of commitment, abuse of trust etc have combined to frustrate every effort to develop the sector. Under this kind of circumstances principals operate in difficult conditions.

Teachers are treated as third class workers and sometimes treated with contempt and disdain, on top of poor remunerations and working conditions. In other words there is complete lack of motivation and incentives. Similarly the schools are in such terrible conditions that even animals are not kept in such condition in some countries. The students too are fed, sleep and study under conditions like prisons or refugees camps in their own country. The teachers work in conditions that are impossible. There is lack of basic text books in some instances for both the teachers and the students, no laboratories, no workshops and libraries, where these are available they are both poorly equipped and furnished or not at all. The problems are so many, extensive and range from systemic to institutional, societal and individual character of people. It is within this difficult context that the principal is expected to perform his/her roles and tasks towards transforming the country. What are these expected roles and tasks of the principal?

The secondary school principal
The Principal performs a wide variety of functions which include tasks like interpreting policy, executing curriculum programmes, taking care of students welfare, securing equipment, physical facilities, sourcing and managing finances, maintaining effective school-community relations, enforcing discipline among both staff and students, organizing guidance and counseling and so on (Musaazi; 1982). Every epoch has its needs and challenges and new challenges constantly arise which also need new approaches as the American experience show (Baker, Boser and Householder; 1992). Principals are today challenged to preside over and lead the training of students to improve their quality such that they will acquire competitive edge in the match towards achieving the goals of not only the transformation agenda but nation building. To effectively face the challenges
requires a fair knowledge of the arts and science of principal’s leadership, the policy and regulatory framework and financial and budgetary matters (Hale and Moorman; 2003).

Overall effective leadership is essential for the achievement of results. The principal’s leadership strengths or weaknesses affect the performance of the entire school (Federal Ministry of Education and Youth Development; 1993). The style of leadership influences the attitude of subordinates to work which may have positive or negative outcomes depending on the type of the leadership (Omosidi; 2006). Even where there is adequacy in most or all requirements when the leadership is poor or not strong the outcomes or results will be below standard.

The principal has to have a good knowledge and understanding of the national education policy and additional government statements like education for self-reliance, education for development, education for affirmative action etc. The principal is expected to have a fair if not sound knowledge of about seven key aspects for successful managing a school namely; principles of educational management, personnel management, managing the curriculum and resources, financial management, monitoring school effectiveness, governance of schools and self-development of educational managers (Federal Ministry of Education and Youth Development: 1993).

Note the fine qualities and responsible manager an ideal principal is supposed to be. A person of integrity, a visionary, a community leader, whose preoccupation is training and molding of children and youth to be productive, responsible leaders and workers of tomorrow who will drive the society, country and possibly humanity as a whole to greatness. The principal is a person that promotes democratic decision making, involving his teachers, students and their parents whenever necessary and who cares about the progress and development of his staff.

But can the principal optimally deploy these qualities and values in an environment that is frustrating due to inadequacies of infrastructures, facilities and funds? Can he/she operate in the situation where there is no motivation, no conducive working environment and even basic daily consumables such as chalk, desks, tables, teaching aids etc are not available or in very poor conditions? Can he/she operate when there is too much control and unnecessary bureaucracy that simple decisions or small expenditures have to be cleared from the headquarters? The controls are so suffocating that initiatives are dampened, nonchalance sets in, and gradual degeneration follows.

**Gombestategovernment policy on secondary education**

In the National Policy on Education the broad goals of secondary education are to prepare the individual for useful living within society and for higher education. Among other specific objectives, secondary education is aimed at developing the talents of students, inspire students with the desire for self improvement, promoting aspects of common ties among Nigerians for unity in the country, raise a generation of people who can think for themselves., respect the views and feelings of others, respect dignity of labour etc and to provide technical knowledge and vocational skills necessary for agricultural, industrial, commercial and economic development (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). The policy in Gombe State cannot be further from that of the nation and the curricular in the schools seem to reflect the general national goals.

Apart from these broad goals, the Gombe State Government emphasized some aspects of its general goals and strategies based on the peculiarities and needs in the state. These were captured in the State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (SEEDS) document.

The target according to the document is to increase secondary school enrollment, reduce dropout rate, increase certification rate reduce gender imbalance and increase transition from primary to secondary. These are to be achieved by renovation, rehabilitation and improving of infrastructure and facilities like libraries, offices, toilets, water supply, etc, construction of additional classrooms, proper equipping of vocational and technical schools, mandating teachers to enroll for higher degrees and continuous training and re-training of teachers, enhanced teachers’ salary, strengthening

183
The noticeable weakness of this policy thrust was the omission of the issues of quality of products and skills acquisition which are some of the fundamental problems of the entire education system. It is public knowledge that there is massive failure and production of redundant students who live idle lives after completing secondary education due to lack of skills. Principals in Gombe State should be very familiar with these broad national and state objectives of secondary education and the State Government’s strategies in the first place for them to be effective and produce positive outcomes.

The agenda and the principals

In respect of education, the Agenda is about access, equity, quality, technical and vocational education, training, funding and resource mobilization, institutional management and teacher education. The task of principals is to interpret these policies in addition to those enumerated by the Gombe State Government and organize the curricular, administration and activities of their individual schools and collectively towards achieving the goals set out for the transformation of the nation in general and the state in particular.

Principals should be guided by national policies and their translated versions in the state. The role of the Principal is defined by the problems of the entire educational system in the state. The challenges are many and varied but the most immediate and glaring ones are; the massive failure of students in national examinations like WAEC and NECO. The statistics over the last few years is something to worry about. While many are unable to qualify for admission into tertiary institutions, they leave school without acquiring any skills, so they remain redundant and idle. Political thugs, the Kalare was able to emerge because of the abundance of idle school leavers. Indisciplined, violent youth and petit criminals roaming the streets, posing threat to security are the outcome of an educational system that have not prepared the school leavers to either go for higher education or be productively self-employed. This type of schools products cannot be expected to be participants in the transformation process of neither the state nor the country.

The educational system in the state is underdeveloped and suffering from long-term neglect leaving it in a near collapse state. There is either inadequacy or complete lack of both basic essentials and major infrastructure and facilities. There is chronic shortage of teachers most especially in critical core subjects like English and Mathematics. Libraries, laboratories and workshops are either not available or are in terrible conditions of disrepair, or not equipped. Classrooms are congested, students’ hostels are in horrible conditions that are not fit for human habitation, very poor sources of good drinking water, lack of decent toilet facilities and very poor feeding are some of crises in the state’s educational sector. We are in the age of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) which is also an industry in its own right, but there is no secondary school in the state that has the facilities. How then do we expect the products of the schools to cope and fully participate in the transformation process? It is nearly impossible to breed decent, responsible and competent people under these types of conditions.

Principals can hardly be held responsible for the deterioration of the school system, because most of the problems have to do with low or lack of political will on those who control the resources that needed to be deployed to transform the school system. Low budgetary allocations, incomplete or non release of budgeted allocations, lack of provision and maintenance of infrastructures, facilities and equipment and such related matters are not in the domain of principals. Therefore their capacities and capabilities are limited by the constraints created by the unfavourable official attitude to the sector. But does that mean principals can do absolutely nothing to contribute to nurturing students that will be competent and capable of being relevant in the transformation agenda?

Certainly, it will be unpatriotic for a principal to just sit back and assume he/she cannot do anything about the situation. One of the qualities of a good and capable leader is to have initiatives and be innovative. Anybody in the teaching profession is not in it for money or material gains; we are in this job because we derive pleasure and satisfaction
from training and molding people to be useful to themselves, to society and humanity in general. The guiding principle at the back of the mind of any Principal should be the conviction that education is the only inexhaustive resource that guarantees a nation’s continuous development. Even without mineral resources a country with a strong and sound educational system can get industrialized and developed as the examples of Japan, Israel and Singapore attest to. While this is so, but no education system could be effective without adequate funding and proper motivation which are two problems that have crippled the nation’s education, yet Principals are expected to transform the schools to achieve the transformation agenda.

Therefore the guiding principle should be to use what is available to improve your school and its functions. The principal should work in collaboration with the Parent-Teacher Association, Old Students Association and Non-Governmental Organization for fund raising activities to generate resources to complement what other resources the school gets. For example Principals in Gombe State could access the services of the Gombe State Agency for Community and Social Development a World Bank assisted programme. From the meager resources available the principal should effect minor repairs of structures and be able to provide basic instructional materials. He/she should find ways and means of motivating both staff and students to achieve effective teaching and learning (Timilehin; 2010).

It is also necessary that principals should exert organized pressure on government to live up to its responsibilities to the educational system/sector. It is certain that political leaders and civil servants know the problems and principals must have been putting pressure yet the situation is degenerating. The Principals should use all levers at their disposal like the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT) to convince or even force the government to change its nonchalant attitude towards secondary education. Ordinary talking, lamentations and despondency will never solve the problem; they will only increase frustration and apathy. Principals cannot improve performance without the necessary and essential tools and materials yet they cannot buy these out of their salaries, so the need to fight for them to be provided. Luckily the present administration of the state government has shown some signs of seriousness and commitment to improving the education sector. With the government’s readiness to uplift the sector principals are challenged to also brace-up to reciprocate its determination and compliment the gesture.

Principals have the responsibility of living exemplary lives, with high moral and ethical standards, transparency and humility in such a way that you become role model. Good leadership qualities are very essential in successful running of secondary schools just like in any organization as has been elaborately argued by Chapman (2002). You must exhibit knowledge and the culture of hard work, discipline and dedication. What students may not get in their classrooms due to lack the necessary teaching aids and materials or inadequate teachers, should be made up by your approach and attitude to work and life. Sports and games should be revived in your schools, so also debating, excursions and visits as mandated in the National policy (2004). If it means charging some token amounts from students or looking for sponsors to bring back to life these extra-curricular activities it is worth it.

**Conclusion**

Principals as patriotic citizens of Nigeria have every reason to think about and discuss what role and contributions they can make to transform the country in the next decade or so. Education being the only inexhaustive resource that development hinges on, the Transformation Agenda cannot succeed without phased transition in the education system, just as the quality of education matters a lot. Nigeria should have by now learnt enough lessons about the negative impact of poor education quality and indeed the country is paying the price. The historical experiences of other nations have clearly shown that basic and secondary educations are critical in technological changes and industrialization of many countries. This makes the principal a pivotal administrator whose leadership could make the difference.

In a country where virtually everything is degenerating and sliding backwards the challenges are enormous. In a world driven by knowledge,
especially of science and technology there is no option to building a sound foundation of the educational sector. Luckily the present administration in the state seems to understand and appreciate the importance of this for the progress and development of the state. Its determination to uplift the sector is a welcome challenge to all, especially if its commitment is not going to be mere paper work and rhetoric. The government needs to match its will with real financial and material resources, monitoring and discipline as well as good motivation for both teachers and students.

While the government is expected to live up to its responsibility, Principals need to be knowledgeable, professionally and administratively competent and resourceful. Training and re-training are some of the best approaches to improving their quality. In view of this ANCOPSS deserve to be commended loudly for its initiating the mandatory Continuing Professional Training Workshop it organizes. However the group needs to be more forceful in ensuring that Government institutions, agencies and other stakeholders strengthen education in general, particularly secondary schools, by providing the requisite infrastructure, facilities, funding and motivation to both staff and students for the dearly needed improvements to meet the challenges of not only the Transformation Agenda but also the targets of the Millennium Development Goals.

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