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Primary Education in Nigeria: What is it all about?

What is learned early in life is resistant to change while that which is learned later in life is most susceptible to change:

Brunner (1956).

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Introduction

Reports of various Educational Review Commissions, of various studies and of various conference papers, have asked questions about Nigerian education in general and Nigerian primary education in particular. Such reports include Banjo (1961), Dike (1962), Ikoku (1964), Taiwo (1968), Tiffen (1966), Okonkwo (1979), the Ford Foundation and the Federal Ministry of Education (1966), Bamgbose (1974), Afolayan (1974), UNESCO (1953), Ubahakwe (1974) and the Commonwealth Education conference (1968). Amongst others, Fafunwa (1971) wondered what could be said to be the dominant social purpose of primary education in Nigeria, and Tiffen (1966) wrote:

One of the basic dilemmas of the Nigerian Primary School is that it is difficult to be sure what it is for (p. 1)

This short and simple study does not try to find an answer to any of the numerous questions raised about primary education. Rather, it tries to underscore the need for a serious effort to be made, without further delay, to start searching for answers to these questions. Basically, the paper surveys the content of social studies texts used in Nigerian primary schools in order to find out what exactly those who make educational decisions actually want Nigerian children to read about.

The decision to examine primary social studies text is based on obvious considerations. Firstly, the concept of national unity the world over is inculcated in the primary school. Primary texts in general and social studies texts in particular are important because it is through them that each society strives to protect and perpetuate its traditions and aspirations (Solomon, 1965; McClelland, 1961, Erikson, 1950). Secondly, as comparative educationists have pointed out, each educational system when closely studied and analysed reveals quite clearly the culture, concept and pattern or way of life of each and every society (Mallinson, p. 8). Put differently, the national characteristics of any given nation will find their expression in the nation's schools and the schools should be constantly used to strengthen and perpetuate the national characteristics and outlook. In fact, it is in the school, particularly at the primary level, that a nation should come to a consciousness of its real being.

Analysis of Texts

In examining the texts used in this survey, one fundamental assumption was made: that the frequency of themes and space allotted to them in any textbook gives an indication of what values adults believe to be important with regard to the education of children.

What do Nigerian Children Read About?

In the survey, five major themes were found to be emphasised in the social studies texts used in Nigerian primary schools. These discussed European influences in Nigeria and the slave trade; life outside Africa; organisations for world peace; life in Africa (outside Nigeria); and Nigeria as a nation.

European Influences and the Slave Trade

Table 1 shows that themes focusing on European influences in Nigeria and the slave trade were treated in 206 pages with a total of 41 readings. Glowing tributes were paid to the works of Mary Slessor, Mungo Park, Mac Gregor Laird, John and Richard Lander, Hugh Clapperton, Major Denham, Dr. Oudney, Dr. Baikie, George Tubman Goldie, John Beecroft and Lord Lugard.

The child is told that Mary Slessor stopped the killing of twins, that Mungo Park tried to find the mouth of the River Niger, that Laird was the first man to sail down the River Niger from Lokoja to the Island of Fernando Po, that the Lander Brothers were the first men to discover the mouth of the River Niger and that Clapperton, Denham and Oudney discovered Lake Chad. Beecroft's major achievement was the planning and execution of the first recorded coup d'état in Nigeria - the overthrow of King Kosoko (the Oba of Lagos in 1818), who refused to take orders from the British Government, and the installation of Akintoye to take his place (Ilesanmi, Book 6, p.11). Finally, to Lord Lugard two major achievements were attributed. Firstly, it was through him that the British conquered and brought under their control the entire Fulani Empire. Secondly, in 1914 Lugard merged the Northern and Southern Protectorates to form a new country he called Nigeria.

Discussions on the slave trade, which flourished between 1485 and 1830 and which was directed at the dehumanisation of man by man, took up 95 pages in 15 readings.

TABLE 1: Themes of Social Studies Texts.

| <i>Subject</i> | <i>Frequency of Occurrence</i> | |
|---|--------------------------------|--------------|
| | No. of Readings | No. of Pages |
| European Influences and the Slave Trade | 41 | 206 |
| Life Outside Africa | 39 | 197 |
| Nigeria as a Nation | 35 | 104 |
| Organisations for World Peace | 25 | 107 |
| Life in Africa (Outside Nigeria) | 10 | 32 |

Life Outside Africa

Themes dealing with life in countries such as Great Britain, France, the U.S.A., the U.S.S.R., the Peoples Republic of China and Israel, were presented in 39 readings of 197 pages. Stories told about these nations leave the reader wondering what message they are intended to convey to the child reading them. For example, stories about Israel instead of telling the child how the Jews have come to tackle their problems with one resolve, love and unity among themselves, rather spend school time recalling how an Air Force Commander named Yoni Natanyahu commanded the Air Force crew that flew to Entebbe in 1976 to free hostages held by Palestinian Liberation Organisation supporters. (Iloje and Okoro, Book 6, pp. 26—32).

About Brazil, the child is told that it obtained its independence from Portugal in 1822 and became a Republic in 1889 and that "Europeans came to West Africa to buy slaves to work in America. Some of these slaves were sold in Brazil. The slaves were freed many years ago and their descendants form the Negro population of Brazil. It is interesting to note that most of the slaves who were sold in Brazil came from Nigeria..." (Ibid, p. 51). A concerned child will certainly wonder what is so "interesting" about the fact that former Brazilian slaves were descendants of Nigeria and not of Great Britain or France or Portugal.

About the United States, the child learns that the country was discovered by a man named Amerigo Vespucci, that its first President was George Washington, that like Nigeria it was a British colony, and that it became independent in 1776. One wonders what use these pieces of information are to the Nigerian children reading them. If America is the great nation that it is, school time could have been spent more productively telling the child about those factors that have held the country together until it became the great world power that it is today.

Further, the child is told that the Peoples Republic of China is a country in the continent of Asia, that the monsoon wind which blows across the country affects it seriously during the summer and winter seasons, that she shares common borders with nine neighbours—Soviet Union, India, Bhutan, Nepal, Burma, Laos, Afghanistan, Vietnam and the Pacific Ocean, and finally that she signed the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty with the U.S.A. for world peace. There is no mention of the Cultural Revolution and what possible lessons Nigeria as a developing nation could learn from the Chinese experience.

Organisations for World Peace

Themes that discussed organisations for world peace took up 107 pages in 25 readings. Major organisations stressed included the United Nations Organisation (UNO) and its agencies, the Commonwealth of Nations, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the Economic Communities of West African States (ECOWAS) and the European Economic Community (EEC).

The child is told that the UN which was formed in 1945 has five permanent members—the Soviet Union, U.S.A., France, Great Britain and China—each of which has a veto power. It has six major organs and six specialised agencies. The major organs are the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council, the

International Court of Justice and the Secretariat. The six agencies named are the World Health Organisation (WHO), the United National Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), the Universal Postal Union (UPU), the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the United Nations International Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF) (Ilesanmi, book 6, pp. 48—51).

The Commonwealth of Nations is presented to the child as the most successful example of international cooperation in the world. Its members are independent nations which were formerly colonised by Great Britain, the great bond between them being the English language. Their laws and administration are influenced by English common law and way of government and their education follows almost the same pattern as in Great Britain (Iloeje and Okoro, Book 6, pp. 89—91).

The OAU, formed in 1963 to unite all independent African countries, is presented as an organisation that functions through three main organs. These are: the Assembly of Heads of States and Governments, the Council of Ministers and the Secretariat. Of particular interest is the comparison drawn between the problems of the OAU and those of the UN. Thus, the OAU is poor because its members are poor, while the UN is an affluent organisation in spite of the fact that some rich member nations do not pay their dues regularly. Most member nations of the OAU do not abide by the decisions of the organisation, particularly when such decisions are not in the best interest of some world powers. Similarly, some world powers violate the decisions of the UN when such decisions go against their own individual interests. The OAU cannot raise a force to liberate African states that are not yet independent, whereas the UN can easily raise a force at any time. Finally, the stability of the UN is in no way affected by instability among the governments of the member-nations of the OAU (Ilesanmi, bk. 6, pp. 39—43; 48—50).

Life in Africa (Outside Nigeria)

Themes dealing with life in Africa (outside Nigeria) are presented in 32 pages of ten readings. Some of the countries discussed are Benin, Togo, Ghana, Niger, Ivory Coast, Liberia, and Sierra Leone.

The child is told that in Ghana 9.5 million people occupy a land area of 238, 537 sq. kms; that these people belong to such ethnic groups as Akan, Ewe, Ga—Adangbe, Guan, Gurma, and Mole-Saphari; and further, that Ghana is divided into eight regions namely Ashanti, Brong-Ahafor, Central, Eastern, Northern, Upper Volta and Western.

About the Ivory Coast, he is told that 6 million people occupy a land area of 330, 227 sq. kms.; and that its population is made up of many ethnic groups some of which are: Agni-Ashanti, Dan-Gouro, Monde, Koua-Koua, Drumen, Senoufo and Voltaic.

Sierra Leone is presented as a small country of three million people occupying a land area of 71, 744 sq. kms. Like Ghana and the Ivory Coast, its population is made up of many ethnic groups some of which are: the Creoles, the Mandingo, the Mende, the Korankas, the Limbas, the Susu and the Temné. The presentation of other African countries follows strictly the same pattern (Onibonoje, Book 6, chps. 1—II).

Nigeria as a Nation

As Table (1) shows, Nigeria as a nation is discussed in 35 readings of 104 pages (or 23% of total school time). Sub-themes discussed can be examined under two headings namely—themes that centre on symbols of Nigerian nationalism and Nigerian Unity; and those that highlight differences between the various ethnic or tribal groups.

Symbols of Nigerian Nationalism and Unity

A total of 12 readings in 30 pages focusses on those ingredients considered as essential elements of Nigerian nationalism and unity. These are listed as the Nigerian national anthem, the national flag, the coat of arms, the Nigerian Army, Air Force and Navy, the Police Force, the Central Bank, the Nigerian Railway Corporation, the Nigerian Airways Corporation, the National Electric Power Authority, the Joint Admissions and Matriculations Board, the Unity Schools, the National Youth Service Corps, the Nigeria Educational Research Council, the National Museum, the National Universities, the all Nigeria Festival of the Arts and the National pledge (Iloje and Oloro, Book 5, Units 8 and 9; Onibohoje, Book 5, pp. 89—92).

The child is told that these instruments and institutions symbolise peace, prosperity, greatness, happiness, faith, unity and strength of Nigeria for Nigerians. Unfortunately, however, no clue is given anywhere in the texts as to how these instruments and institutions have tried to achieve or even to contribute towards achieving these admirable objectives. The child is undoubtedly aware of the shouts of tribalism, ethnocentricism and nepotism that follow virtually every appointment to the chair of any of the national universities, or the appointments of members of the boards of directors of federal corporations. Perhaps he even knows about the victimisations and/or protections on tribal and ethnic grounds that have become part of the culture in Federal and State Government establishments (since his father, uncle, cousin or nephew may have been a victim). In addition, there are constant cries of neglect from tribal and ethnic 'minorities'. In spite of this situation, the child is told that the nation's coat of arms stands for unity and faith, and that the nation's flag is a symbol of truth and justice.

Besides, it has yet to be shown that the Nigerian child learns anything about his country by merely reciting parrot-like, meaningless words in English in the name of the National Anthem or the 'great' pledge of loyalty to the nation. The National Anthem, the child is told, reminds all Nigerians that they are brothers and sisters. The pledge of loyalty, on the other hand, talks of honesty, honour, glory, and unity (Ilesanmi, Book 5, pp. 59). The child is, of course, living in a Nigeria where bribery and corruption that have tribal and ethnic undertones, have become institutionalised by people whom he saw reciting the 'great' pledge at the swearing-in ceremony before they took up positions of trust. The fear is that the child may start thinking that the school is either an institution built specifically to tell lies to children and that the poor teacher is a partner in the crime, or that the school involves mere flights of fancy and has practically nothing to do with life, not in Nigeria anyway.

Differences between tribal/ethnic groups

Twenty-three readings in 64 pages highlight the differences between the various tribal and/or ethnic groups. The constituent tribal groups are presented as being different in virtually everything; physical expression and complexion, styles of dressing and attitudes towards constituted authority. For example, Hausa-speaking people are presented as tall, slenderly built and ebony black in complexion. They wear baggy trousers, flowing gowns and either turban their heads or wear soft felt caps. They are obedient, easy-going and law-abiding. The Yorubas are presented as distinguishable by tribal marks, fond of expensive clothes and ornaments, polite, respectful and have high regard for age and positions of authority. The Igbos are shown to be of medium height, dark in complexion, having a broad nose and thick lips, western in their dress, business-like in their dealings, aggressive and hard-working. They run an egalitarian society in which emphasis is placed on individual self-expression and self-fulfilment (Onibonoje, Book 5, pp. 5-15; (Iloeje and Okoro, Book 5, pp. 5-7).

The various tribal/ethnic groups are also presented as having different works of art, different life styles, different traditional systems of government, worshipping different gods (Iloeje and Okoro, Book 5, Unit 2), speaking different languages which belong to different linguistic family groups (some are said to belong to the Niger-Congo family, some to the Afro-Asiatic family and others to the Nile-Saharan family (Onibonoje, Book 5, Chapter 2). Finally there is disunity in the country dating back to history: "There was no unity among the various kingdoms/tribes in the area now known as Nigeria."

A close and careful look at texts other than those used in social studies reveals that the experience is exactly the same. In mathematics, for example, the child is confronted with problems on "papering walls" allowing for windows, doors and fireplaces. The child has only seen walls plastered with mud and, more recently, a mixture of sand and cement, and floors covered with rectangular grass mats. As for fire places, the only one he knows about is a three-stone support which his mother uses in cooking. Secondly, he is asked to imagine two water pipes filling a cistern with water, and a third pipe emptying it, all turned on simultaneously, and to estimate, given their dimensions, when the cistern would be filled with water. In the first place, what is a cistern? Secondly, why could it not be just a waterpot? Besides, is it not madness to turn on the waste pipe and at the same time try and fill the cistern?

Thirdly, there are problems on trains rushing past each other at varying speeds, instead of drawing up at the platform one at a time as the child knows they do in Nigeria. They do not stop to fill up at the stand pump, but rather scoop up water from between the rails at many cubic feet per second (Larcombe, 1957, parts II and III). Nigerian trains do not do this. There is only one track and the trains wait at the stations for one train to pass the other and there is no water in between the lines to be scooped up. Naturally, the child concludes that mathematics involves, like most other subjects he is taught in the school, mere flights of fancy, and has nothing to do with life in Nigeria.

The case being made here can best be understood when one reads through the list of reference books recommended for teachers and school reference libraries in Nigerian primary schools in the *Guidelines on Primary School Curriculum* by the Nigeria Educational Research Council (1971). For example, under the heading "Cultural and Creative Art" all the reference texts have

been written by cultural outsiders with backgrounds that do not pretend to have the slightest knowledge of Africa. Some of these texts are Andrews (1954), Peter (1958), Ward (1947), Batchelder (1956), Cole (1940), Lowenfeld (1952), Mearns (1958), Read (1958), Breda (1954), Weiss (1956), Slade (1957), Newick (1953) and Suitfield-Wells (1963).

In addition, while the committee that prepared the Guidelines spent a good time discussing in fine detail the English language curriculum, it did nothing in the direction of drawing up a programme for the teaching of Nigerian languages. In fact, it was clearly stated in the Guidelines that: "The committee deliberately avoided drawing up a comprehensive vernacular programme because it was outside its terms of reference..." (p. 87). This, in spite of the fact that the National Policy on Education (1969, 1977) considered it to be "in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother tongue. In this connection, the government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba."

Conclusion

It is obvious from the facts stated above that, both in content and context, most of the issues discussed in the school texts deal with situations outside the imaginative premise of the Nigerian primary school child. Thus, for the Nigerian child education and life can never become one, since the books he reads extol no ideals of his society and paint no vivid pictures of his home. African society in general and Nigerian society in particular are presented to the child as soulless and in disarray. The OAU and ECOWAS are presented as spineless institutions with no system of ethics and no principles of conduct.

Nigeria's ethnic and tribal differences are exaggerated while those things that keep them together are deemphasized (See Okonkwo, 1981c). The child is told that the only institutions that really function are those controlled by forces outside Africa. Such institutions include the UN, the EEC and the Commonwealth of Nations. The heroes of Nigerian/African history are such Europeans as Mungo Park, Mary Slessor, John Beecroft, Lord Lugard, MacGregor Laird and even Israel's Yoni Netanyahu. The slave trade is treated as if it were the best thing that happened to Africa and Africans. Even the appointment of who should be a chief in Nigeria is decided by Europeans. In addition, the child is told that English is a more useful language to him than Hausa, Igbo, Efik, Yoruba or Swahili. It is not surprising, therefore, that one Nigerian educationist describes English as "a language which seems to raise the person who is acquainted with it in the scale of civilisation" (Spencer, 1971).

Finally, the child ends up learning little or nothing at all about life in other African countries other than their population and how many tribal groupings each is endowed with. He learns, however, that America was discovered by a man named Amerigo Vespucci; that Brazil became a Republic in 1889; that China shares common borders with Burma, Bhutan, Nepal and Laos, and has signed the Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty with the United States.

Recommendations

All over the world, there is a realization that only through the right education can a better order of society be built (Singh, 1966). Education is not something in mid air, cut off from the daily life of the child or from his future work as a citizen. Education, Kandel (1933) writes, is a living thing and spontaneous only if it is inspired by the cultural foundations of the people whom it seeks to serve. Real education, particularly at the primary school level, must be based on the actual environment and experiences of the child and must fit him for the work he will be called upon to do after school life. It must deal with absolute and concrete facts that the child himself can verify. Themes discussed at this stage must be consistent and avoid all forms of doubt or ambiguity. Most importantly, they must deal with facts that will help the child to develop a positive view of himself and his society.

Given this background, I will hazard two fundamental recommendations. First, a more serious and earnest effort should be made to effect a total reappraisal of the nation's entire education system (more importantly, as it affects the primary school stage), with a clearer statement made about content and the medium for articulating and communicating education. There is no doubt that the strength of any nation can be determined from its education system. For example, the strength of its education system has contributed immensely to the Americanisation of millions of immigrants in the United States. Thus, even though there are some 50,000 school districts in the United States, there is a sense of national educational purpose common to all and articulated through the national language. Moreover, the apparent success of the Soviet Union at national integration is a reflection of the strength of its education system, which, again, is articulated through its national language. It is therefore obvious that if Nigeria is to achieve the peace, strength and unity that Nigerians dream and sing so much about, the role of an indigenous language as a force in national integration, cannot be overlooked.

Put more succinctly, I am recommending that one Nigerian language be developed for use in all primary schools in the country. In addition, I must stress the need for implementing, without further delay, the recommendations of the *National Policy on Education* (1977) with regards to the teaching of vernacular languages. For education at the post-primary and tertiary levels, I will only re-echo the recommendations of Moumouni (1968) and Soyinka (1977). The mechanics of teaching the languages involved can easily be worked out if only the spirit is willing (see Mwingira 1969).

Secondly, if it is true, as some educationists and social psychologists claim, that what is learned early in life is resistant to change, I am recommending that the writing of ALL class and reference texts to be used at the primary and post-primary levels be effected in its entirety by cultural insiders (see Okonkwo 1979a and 1982a). In this direction, I must add that the Federal Government should make funds available for research, seminars, conferences and workshops directed entirely towards the development of relevant school texts. In the meantime, the writing of the few texts done by indigenes has been undertaken by people who have wanted to make quick money and the result is that no serious attention was paid to content. As has been shown by the texts analysed in this study, a few clever people have merely reworded some aspects of texts used during the colonial period which told stories about Africa from the European's point of view (see Okonkwo 1982a). Unfortunately, most of

these indigenous authors are in positions to influence the acceptance of the texts by various state governments and even by the Federal Ministry of Education.

The merits of this recommendation cannot be over-emphasized for, if it is accepted, it will be possible to eliminate all irrelevant material from school texts and thus bring education home within the imaginative environment of the learner. In addition, it will then be possible to teach the child those fundamental cultural beliefs and traditions commonly shared by all the tribal and ethnic groups in Nigeria and even in the Sub-Saharan continent of Africa which, hitherto, have been de-emphasized (see Okonkwo 1978, 1979a, 1981b, 1981c and 1982c).

It is only by implementing these recommendations that we can get the child to grow up, learning at the same time how to solve the problems around him by himself and how to relate constructively to people around him. At present, our educational offerings discourage creativity and initiative, and instead create for the child a situation of utter dependency such that he always has to turn to other people such as his teachers or parents, or even to some supernatural power, for solutions to his problems. This tendency, which results from unfamiliar and poorly articulated educational content and experiences, carries through to adult life when the child turns to non-existent American and European 'experts' to analyse and solve his, as well as Nigeria's problems.

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