

The Role of Teachers in Transforming Nigeria: Challenges and the Way Forward

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Date Received: March 8, 2015; Date Revised: April 29, 2015

Abstract - The paper sought to explicate the role of teachers in transforming Nigeria. It viewed teachers as professionally trained personnel charged with the responsibility of disseminating positive knowledge, attitudes and skills to learners in the school. Transformation on the other hand involves a shift in our orientation in such a way that new actions and results become possible. The analysis established that teachers serve as role models to their learners. Through this, the character and personality of the learners are moulded in the right direction which leads them to their final destinations. Nigerian teachers are saddled with the onus of differentiating their learners on the basis of their intellectual and social sophistication in preparation for occupational and social transformation of the society. Again, for National transformation to flourish, the society must be prosperous in knowledge which is often sought and acquired through the teachers. Although teachers play a cardinal role in the transformation of the society, they are beset with bottle-necks among which are; lack of recognition in the society, miserable economic conditions and inadequate teaching and learning facilities. It was concluded that if at all there is any hope for transforming the society, the key lies in the hands of teachers. It was recommended that society members should look at teachers with additional respect in societal life and teachers from primary to tertiary institutions should come under one umbrella namely, Nigeria Association of Teachers.

Keywords: teachers, challenges, Nigeria, social transformation

INTRODUCTION

Transformation is such a commendatory concept that sheer mention of it attracts a lot of attention. This is because like reform, it conjures the notion of change. As a buzz word, it is a mythic thing that people, organizations, religious, institutions-political, social and educational strive to attain. In consequence, religions and political leaders have been using it as a catch word for instance, the transformation agenda.

As attractive as this concept is, its achievement can hardly be feasible without a conscious and deliberate effort of the individual or society. In achieving societal transformation, education becomes indispensable as it is an effective catalyst that brings hope to humanity and transforms societies positively.

In the process of acquiring education, the role of teachers is central. They mediate between educational content and the learners. It is in this regard that they are truly the yardstick that measures the achievements and aspirations of the nation. The worth and potentialities of a country get evaluated in the work of teachers. Thus, the people of a country are the

enlarged replica of their teachers because the teachers are the real nation builders. The Federal Republic of Nigeria (2009) confirms this by stating that "no nation can rise above the quality of its teachers". In this connection, it can be safely inferred that no meaningful transformation can be achieved in Nigeria without the teachers playing their roles.

The task of teachers in transforming the society is to first of all transform the learners through effecting an attitudinal change in them. The testimony of Gwen, a production manager in Kate (2013) provides an illuminating instance of the role of teachers in transforming their learners. Accordingly, Gwen openly confessed that:

My school teacher Mr. Koch pushed me to reach my full potential.... As I slacked and rebelled, he never let me forget that I possessed a special talent. I hated it at that time but now I am able to reflect- he taught me self-respect and discipline in a firm but kind way. I am forever grateful to him for changing me.

The Teacher – Who is he?

The need to clarify who a teacher is stems from the claims in some quarters that everybody is a teacher because at one time or the other, we teach ourselves or others something. For instance, we teach our coworkers and our employees. We teach our children, siblings or even parents. We teach our friends or even enemies. This implies that throughout our lives, we are engaged in teaching. In a strictly professional sense, this explanation as earlier on pointed out is too general as everybody in the world is a teacher. In a highly restrictive sense, the American heritage dictionary provides the definition of a teacher as “one who teaches, especially one hired to teach”. This definition provides only scanty and vague information about who a teacher is. In filling the gaps created by the above definitions, a teacher could be defined as a professionally trained personnel who is charged with the responsibility of disseminating positive knowledge, attitudes and skills to learners in the school.

Professional teachers are distinguished from quacks by the following qualities punctuality at all school functions, cleanliness, honesty, patience, resourcefulness, discipline, good sense of humour, firmness and fairness in decision making, establish good relationship with learners, colleagues and parents, motivate learners, a continuous learner by attending workshops, seminars, conferences, refresher and in-service courses, hard-work – teaching and keeping of school records, knowledge of subject matter and appropriate methodology, and obedience to school authority, employers and other constituted authorities.

Conceptualising Transformation

Because transformation cannot be conceived in a straight jacket manner, there are almost as many definitions as writers on it. These definitions depend greatly on the orientation of the scholar offering the definition. Some instances will suffice. From the organizational perspective, transformation connotes a change that moves an organization in a new direction and takes it to an entirely new level of effectiveness where there is no resemblance with the past configuration or structure.

From the Christian religion view point, transformation has to do with a revolutionary overhaul of the individual. According to Romans 12:2, the process of transforming an individual requires him to change “beginning at the mind.... The progress of

sanctification, dying to sin more and more and living to righteousness more and more”. This form of transformation implies a complete change like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly. In mathematics, transformation means the movement of a shape to a different position but still retaining its area, size, angles and line lengths.

From the fore gone, it is clear that the string that runs through the definitions is change. To transform therefore will involve a shift in the orientation of the individual, organization or society in such a way that new actions and results become possible. In relation to the Nigerian society, Osobie (2012) provides an appropriated explanation thus:

“It is a mandate for a radical, structural and fundamental re – arrangement and re – ordering of the building blocks of the Nation. It portends a fundamental re-appraisal of the basic assumptions that underlie our reforms and developmental efforts, that will and should alter the essence and substance of our national life. The expectations of most Nigerians is for a development blueprint that will transform the economy, re-invent the politics of our nation, secure the polity, care for the underprivileged and provide responsible, responsive and transformative leadership.”

Role of Teachers in Transforming Nigeria

The task of transforming Nigeria is a collective one with all Nigerians from all works of life collaborating with each other to move the country forward. It is in this vein that the efforts of the teachers in national transformation are discussed below.

Teachers as Role Model

As role models, Nigerian teachers are people that inspire and encourage their learners to strive for greatness, live to their fullest potential and see to the best of themselves. Teachers as their learners’ models are admired to the extent that their learners aspire to be like them. In this connection, the learners imitate their teachers commitment to excellence. They also look up to their teachers for advice and guidance. This has made some students to say of their teachers: “my teacher, my hero”.

Teachers have the best opportunity to be the role models of their learners because after the children’s parents, the teachers are greatly involved in the

socialization process of the children. At the basic education level, literacy, numeracy and the ability to communicate effectively are inculcated into the children. As they mature into adults, they proceed to senior secondary schools and eventually the tertiary level of education still, the teachers are there to answer their questions, listen to their problems and teach them about the new phase of new life which they have entered.

Teachers as role models therefore do not only watch their students grow but they also help them to grow in the right direction. In this respect, the teachers do not only teach the students the content of the syllabus but also important life lessons. The school therefore is not only a place of academic learning but also a place of social learning. It is worthy of note at this juncture that although teachers' influence on the social sphere of children's life lessens as the students mature, early lessons still affect the way that the students interact with others in the future.

As role models, teachers are fount of experience. They have already been to where their children are going, undergone what they will go through thus they are in position to pass along lessons, not only regarding subject matter, but lessons of life. In accomplishing this, teachers are often poised to always achieve what they had started. So, once they have set a goal, they are determined to attain it despite the challenges that they might encounter. This will teach the children that "it can be done" as they go into the society, they will learn to persevere and to be determined and focus in live.

As good role models, teachers respect the children that they teach and other people in the educational community. They do not step on the toes of others to get ahead or look down on their colleagues. They show gratitude when others assist them. It is often these little things that teachers do that make the big difference in how they are perceived in the society. By this, peaceful co-existence is entrenched in the society. It is only when there is peace that any form of transformation can thrive.

Teachers as good role models are proud of their profession. It is for this that a teacher can say without mincing words that "I am a teacher to the core". The pride of teachers in their profession is imbibed by the children who will in turn show pride in their future professions. This attitude will encourage hard work which will lead to an increased productivity for national transformation.

As role models, teachers admit their mistakes when they go wrong and apologize. This is because as human beings, we are not perfect. So, when teachers go wrong, they draw the attention of the children who are watching and learning to it and tell them how they plan to correct the mistake. By this, they have taken responsibility of their mistake. When this is done, the children will understand that everyone makes mistakes but it does not mark the end of the world as things can be put right again.

No wonder that, Ogundele, Musa and Jimba (2015) stated that teachers do not only show children the best decision but they also show them how they come to that conclusion. By so doing, the children will be able to apply that reasoning whenever they are in a similar situation. In later life, the children will be able to think out solutions to their life problems rather than running to parents or peers when confronted with life problems.

From the discussion so far, it could be clearly seen that the role of teachers as role models in transforming the society is very critical because it has far reaching influence on the society. As a good model worthy of emulation, the students try to follow their teachers in their manners, dressing, etiquette and style of conversation. They are their ideal and can lead them anywhere therefore, good teachers play a prominent role in making the future of their students and the society. It is for this reason that teachers make frantic efforts to abstain from what in their thinking will mislead the children. Nyarenda (2012) reports that "majority of Nepalese teachers in the rural areas are non-smokers as they are role models in the community. No wonder that cigarettes have a very poor market in the villages". A corrupt and incompetent teacher on the other hand produces a corrupt and incompetent generation. A nation with corrupt teachers is a nation at a great risk because everyday announces the advent of its approaching destruction.

Teachers as Guidance Counsellors for Nigerian Transformation

Although the teachers primary function is teaching, his role in the dissemination of guidance functions cannot be ignored. This is because the children that they teach come from diverse family backgrounds where some of them may have problems like economic difficulties, lack of time of parents to properly bring them up and broken homes arising from separation of families. The school environment

can also constitute behavioural problems to the children as they interact with their peers. For these reasons, teachers are also counsellors who are concerned with the health, education, social and vocational needs of the children. In the words of Musa (2005), another task of the “teacher is to act in *Loco-parentis* by drawing the learner very close to him and accepting his peculiarities”.

As students come to the school, they may have academic challenges that require the assistance of the teacher. Ebule (2002:85) identifies the following as the likely problems of students:

“Poor study habits, school phobia, problems of choice of subjects or course, choices of co-curricular offerings, choice of educational institutions, poor academic performance, uncondusive learning environment, lack of motivation to learn, school drop-outs, skills in taking examination, problem of examination phobia as well as inability to adjust to the school environment.”

Through observation or interview, teachers identify students with academic problems and resolve them amicably. This enables the students to perform maximally in their academic pursuit.

In order to facilitate occupational choice and vocational planning, teachers assist the students to select an occupation, prepare for it, enter into it and progress in it. While in school, teachers observe the students’ interests, abilities, aptitudes and personality on the basis of which they encourage them in the appropriate way to utilize their potentials. Teacher counsellors therefore, attempt to provide the students with information about the right subject combinations for the job of their interests which concur with the students’ abilities and capabilities.

The significance of the above exercise is to ensure that the choice of jobs by the students are done in line with their interests and aptitudes. Where the contrary is the case, the students concerned on graduation may be misfits. Others may even drop-out of school where their mental abilities do not match with the chosen jobs.

Teachers as counsellors and societal transformers help the students to understand themselves and get along with others without much problems. With this, most social problems of the students within and outside the school are resolved. Thus, the students will grow up to be socially, morally and educationally

sound because they have acquired a wholesome personality. With this crop of students, the schools will be peaceful and on completion, they will go into the society to be round pegs in round holes thereby changing the society for better.

The Academic Role of Teachers in Transforming Nigeria

The responsibility of producing competent manpower for the management of all sectors of societal life lies wholly in the hands of teachers. Impliedly, without teachers, the future generation cannot consolidate and sustain the gains of present day transformation. In developing manpower for the society, teachers influence the abilities of the learners in such a way that societal transformation is made feasible. It is for this reason that transformation traverse all facets of national life like in politics, power, economy, health, agriculture, industry and education.

From the above, be you a politician, medical doctor, banker, engineer, lawyer and scientist, you were at one time or the other students learning under the teacher. Put in other words, everybody that is somebody today was taught by the teacher. It therefore become uncontrovertibly the claim that teaching is the mother of all professions thus the world of tomorrow will be born only from the teachers of today. It is the teachers who are at the forefront of winning the battle against illiteracy, ignorance, under development and poverty. These are attacked through the teachers academic role which include teaching, evaluating, motivating students to learn, maintaining discipline in the classroom and creating conducive environment for learning to take place.

In teaching, teachers transmit knowledge, attitudes and skills into the learners. This helps in effecting attitudinal change in the students. Nyereda (2012) supports this position by positing that “teachers are responsible for the change that take place in learners. Their words and actions trigger positive behavioural and attitudinal change in learners”.

Knowledge is one of the most important ingredients in the transformation process. For this consideration, the curriculum is made up of interrelated corpus of knowledge that are neatly packaged to improve the lots of the learners in preparation for their roles as agents of societal change. Disclosing the significance of the teachers in curriculum implementation, Nyirenda (2014) explains that:

"The curriculum taught at school bears the objective of transmitting knowledge and skills to students, who at the end could support change within their households and later at the societal level. Teachers become very important in ensuring that students obtain the adequate skills and knowledge which will support their personal and social change."

From the above, it becomes clear that teachers receive children from diverse home backgrounds who differ in knowledge, skills and behaviour and mould them into educated people that contribute immensely in the development of the society. It is through the perseverance, love and sacrifices of teachers that knowledge in the sciences, arts, and social sciences are disseminated to the learners who use it to be great men in the task of nation building. For any society to be transformed therefore, she must be prosperous in knowledge which can not be accessed if not sought and received through the teachers.

In inculcating knowledge, attitudes and skills into the learners, teachers have to bring their expertise in pedagogical strategies to bear in the process. At whatever rate, teachers choice of instructional strategies are normally guided by the modern trend where the child is placed at the centre of the teaching/learning process. This sharply contrast the traditional method of teaching which Friore calls the banking system characterized by rote learning. In it, the students imbibe verbatim what is given to them by the teacher as gospel truth, learn it by heart and regurgitate same on examination day. In this case, the learners are more concerned with getting the correct information from the teacher in order to pass examinations instead of gaining a full understanding and application of the stuff. The old model of instruction is therefore predicated on information scarcity. Teachers and their books serve as information oracles, spreading knowledge to a population with few other ways to get it. The teachers' day to day task is to broadcast content to students who sit in rows on desks dutifully listening and recording what they heard in preparation for examination day. In teaching for transformation, teachers do not simply add new information on the pre-existing knowledge of their learners because this practice does not promote critical thinking in the learners. Mezirow (1991) recommends perspective transformation teaching which he described as the process of becoming critically aware of how and why the learners'

assumptions have constrained the way in which they perceive, understand and feel about their world, changing these structures of habitation expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating and intergrading perspective and finally making choices. In using transformative learning, teachers employ the service of activity based teaching methods like enquiry, discussion, drama and field trip.

When learners acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes through activity based pedagogical strategies and under conducive learning environment, they are prepared to go into the society and transform it in their areas of specialization. On the other hand, when teachers do not possess the required academic sophistication to discharge their duties in adequately equipped learning institutions, positive transformation will not be feasible. Rather, the institutions will produce graduates who are corrupt. For money or other attractions, such teachers could leak examination questions, falsify students scores or engage in other forms of professional misconducts. Politicians produced from these institutions will be greedy, deceitful, dishonest and un patriotic and architects will design buildings that will collapse on their occupants.

Challenges Militating Against Teachers Roles in Transforming Nigeria

As important as teachers are in transforming the society, they are constrained in certain aspects of executing their functions to the sad extent that the society remains untransformed. In what follows, a discussion on some vital factors militating against teachers performance of their roles in transforming Nigeria shall be undertaken.

In the olden days, teachers were a symbol of respect. Because of the role that they played in transforming the society, they were admired by their students and members of the society. By the simple way of their appearance, they served as good role models for the students. However, there came a time when economic crisis set in and teachers become victims of non payment. In consequence, some teachers began to wear shoes that were tired at the front and worn at the heels. Their clothes become shoddy and the children therefore had less to admire than before and being children, the appearance of their teachers soon became object of ridicule and even of the coining of nick names.

Over time, teachers began to be looked down upon rather than being looked up at. Students began to look elsewhere for their role models. Mentoring

therefore became problematic. Resulting from all these, the services rendered by teachers are under valued thus they are derecognized, not appreciated and disrespected by students, parents and members of the society. Akpa (2014) beautifully captures this scenario in the following words:

“Materialism weighs heaviest in our societal value system. In many respects, the teacher is challenged and forced to recoil to his shell as he lacks what it takes to cope with the unfortunate demands of this age.... With poor and irregular pay, teachers erk out for survival through un orthodox means.”

The role of teachers in transforming the society are so important that demands only the best, most intelligent and competent members of the intellegentia to be allowed to qualify for this noble profession. It is however unfortunate to find that generally, the worst and most incapable members of the society find their way into teaching profession. Anyone who fails to find an opening in any other walk of life, gets into this profession and recklessly plays with the destiny of the nation. It is confirmed that a total of 207 813 unqualified teachers teach in the 36 states of Nigeria with the North – West geo-political zone accounting for 48.8% while the North – East has 57.7%. North central 38%, South – East 16.7%, South -South 19.2% and South West 6.7% (punch, may 24th, 2012).

With the growing significance of information and communication technology (ICT) all over the globe, the need for teachers to be ICT compliant becomes inevitable. Through ICT, the teachers can access substantial and current materials in their areas on the web. This shall be of much help in improving the quality of teaching and learning and also in the implementation of E-learning for the benefit of pre-service teachers. Ironically, most teachers are not ICT compliant. This according to Akpa (2014) “poses a lot of challenges to the teaching profession as the practitioners are intimidated by their students who better understand the new technology and are ahead of the teachers on its application”.

A learner friendly environment is advocated even by the National policy on education for the achievement of Nigerian goals and objectives across all levels of the educational system through the provision of adequate infrastructure like classrooms, functional laboratories, workshops and instructional materials. But, Nigerian teachers operate under a very

hash and uncondusive teaching/learning environment where virtually all the necessary infrastructural facilities are either grossly inadequate or completely absent. The situation has depreciated to the sad extent that in some cases, it is the teachers that buy chalk – the commonest commodity in the school to teach the pupils. By extension, most of the laboratories and workshops in our schools are not in any way functional. Ogundele and Olaniyi, (2012) went further that most of the presence of jungles, floods, social crises all which made constitutes great that to the both the teachers and the students. The authors went further to note that even the parents are not at rest at home. The school enviroemntal variables however lead to high dropout, wastage and internal inefficiencies in Nigerian school system.

In an attempt to express their concern over the above predicaments, teachers from the primary to the tertiary levels have embarked on countless strikes but all to no avail. A glaring instance is the Colleges of Education Academic Staff Union (COESU) nationwide strike of December 2013 in pursuance for the improvement of the following; infrastructural decay in the colleges of education, non-funding of teaching practice for teacher trainees, non-accreditation of NCE programmes since 2010, the proliferation of sub-standard colleges of education inspite of the persistent outcry by the union and general funding issues, especially near zero capital allocation.

Although the strike lasted for about a year, the government remains insensitive to these core challenges threatening the congenial atmosphere for meaningful teaching/learning in colleges of education across the country. This it is supposed, is the case in other institutions of learning. In situations like this, how can society achieve the highly cherished transformation?. This explains why societal problems are rebranded over the ages like old wine in a new skin.

CONCLUSION

From the discussion so far, it becomes needless to mention that if at all there is any hope of transforming Nigeria and the world in general, the key lies in the hands of teachers. This is because it is the teachers who transmit knowledge, attitudes and skills into the learners. With these, they enter life with values firmly etched in their hearts to move the society forward. Despite this significant role of the teachers, the society looks at them with disdain as reflected in their pay

pockets and disrespect. As rejected as the teachers are, they remain the corner stone upon which societal transformation most build on. Teaching therefore is not in any way a lost art; it is the regard for it that is a lost tradition.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above conclusion, if teachers are to assume their rightful place in the transformation agenda of Nigeria, the following recommendations have to be implemented immediately.

1. Given the significance of the role that teachers play in transforming the society, they should be given appropriate recognition for the value of the service that they render. This could be done by allocating 10% of national awards to teachers, active participation of teachers in national educational policy formation, monitoring and evaluation.
2. Since the society expects a lot from the teachers by blaming every misgiving of the learners on them, and as the saying goes, that onto who much is given, much is expected; the government should take a second and sincere look at the pay pockets of teachers.
3. The minimum qualification of professional teachers should be a bachelors degree in education
4. Teachers at all levels of the education system – primary, secondary and tertiary should unite under one national umbrella labelled the Nigeria Association of Teachers. (NAT)
5. Since it is only the owner of a room that knows where it leaks, the minister of education, commissioner of education and councilor of education should be dedicate, practicing and registered teachers.
6. The government should ensure adequate funding of education so that teaching and learning will be carried out in a teacher and learner friendly environment.

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