

A PANACEA FOR TEACHERS' CONFLICT IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION (UBE) PROGRAMME IN NIGERIA

By

SULE, M. N. (PhD)

Department of Educational Foundation,
Faculty of Education, University of Jos.

Abstract

Nigeria has battled for so many years with the question of falling standard in education. The situation appears to stem profoundly from incessant crisis as a result of teachers' conflict in the education system which has adversely affected the attainment of high academic standards. This paper x-rays the evolution and the occurrences of teachers' conflict in Nigeria's educational system. Government approaches at the various stages of conflicts aimed at providing resolutions are examined while suggestions meant to remedy the situation to give a sound and sustainable UBE programme implementation are proffered.

Introduction

The advent of an education programme with the nature of goals as the Universal Basic Education (UBE) is not new in the history of the educational efforts of this country. Perhaps, what is new is the fact that the UBE programme is being implemented in a now politically liberal regime.

Specifically, the programme has the desired legal backing, as the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999, Chapter 11, section 18, subsection (1) says that, government shall direct its policy towards ensuring that there are equal and adequate educational opportunities for its citizens at all levels. Subsections 3a, b, c and d prescribe that government shall as and when practicable provide free, compulsory and universal primary education, free secondary, university and adult literacy education programmes. This government's perception as circumscribed in the nation's constitution is a strive to eradicate illiteracy amongst a great majority of its people. Government sees the attainments of the ideals of national ethics to be directly related to the acquisition of desired educational values. Without sound education, it may be difficult for citizens to show appreciation for the virtues of discipline, integrity, dignity of labour, social justice, religious tolerance, self-reliance and patriotism. Nigerians have therefore welcomed the Federal Government's policy to introduce the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme and see it as a reasonable approach to address the underlying causes of under development. Nigeria's democracy or indeed any other democracies across the world require significant literacy for the majority of its populace for the promotion of its development efforts for economic and social upliftments. As a nation, Nigeria must induce energy, intelligence and utmost imagination to bear on measures to extenuate conflict in the educational system, which has brought tremendous delay in efforts to actualize the gains of our struggle for a better society. The teachers' conflict resolution effort of government in the new UBE programme must be perceived as a viable ingredient for a successful and sustainable implementation of the programme for a better society.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Enoh (2000) appreciated the fact that social order is characterized by a state of flux arising from constant conflict between opposing forces and interest. Thus, deviations from the normal are seen as both normal and necessary. Otite and Ogionwo (1979) on the other hand see the growing inequality in the distribution of resources among societies and within societies as one of the

principal sources of social conflict in the present day society.

No societal programme can succeed without clear understanding and effective collaboration by members in deliberate efforts to achieve its lofty objectives. Thus, teachers on whose shoulders the responsibility of implementing the UBE programmes rest require no less significant motivation to serve as inducements. The economic and social conditions of school teachers have been at precarious levels whereby attracting only low levels of motivation. These have been major sources of frustration and confrontation for teachers. Thus, the continuous existence of teachers' conflict cannot be too far from this circumstance. Since conflict is a continuous process of social change, no one can agitate for a permanent eradication of teachers' conflict but rather a remediation of it in order to have a successful implementation process of the UBE to achieve the desired objectives.

Since societies are composed of social relationships, such conflicts may be between workers and management, teachers and pupils, teachers and parents and teachers and government. These social groups demand for recognition and the implementation of their ideals in social relationships. Thus, in the school system social antagonism has often ensued between teachers and governmental institutions responsible for the management of education.

As Vanghan and Archer (1971), based their conflict model, institutional change is caused by the interplay of groups and ideas in the struggle for domination in society. Societal groups and individuals desire and agitate for recognition by struggling to dominate others by seeking to maintain their position in society by controlling other groups and down-playing on other ideas by making theirs universal. This however does not always receive the understanding of all groups that equally seek for recognition in society. The lack of understanding between groups over operational tenets has often resulted in conflict situations which at times remain unresolved for considerable length of time.

One of the most contentious areas of conflict in the Nigerian educational system has been that of resource allocation to this sector. The operators in this sector have relatively been under low morale due to adverse working conditions occasioned by inadequate allocation of resources. Apparently, there have been agitations for positive changes meant to improve the operations of this sector. These agitations have manifested in forms of conflicts and as Cohen (1968) puts it, conflict can be seen as a product of change rather than its cause. Since no institution is completely autonomous, education is thus always partly integrated with other institutions. One implication is that the groups that dominate education are never purely educational and often do not clearly see reasons for efforts to improve the practice of education. Successive political leaderships in Nigeria may not be completely exonerated from this and so the perpetual teachers' conflict over the years.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF TEACHERS' CONFLICT IN NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A number of issues led to the development of teachers' conflict in Nigerian educational development. A major one was Mr. Grier's 1926 educational code which super ceded the then existing 1916 code. Fafunwa (1974) reported that the 1916 code had made it possible for a standard V or a standard IV teacher to proceed to a training college for further two years training after passing the second year pupil teachers' examination. After successfully completing this training the teacher proceeded to take the second class examination. A successful candidate who obtained three good annual reports would automatically be awarded a first class certificate.

The 1926 code of education on the other hand recommended a four year training course in the college after which a third class certificate would be awarded. Aspects of the recommendation specified that before a teacher proceeded to qualify for second class, certificate, such a teacher must have received three good annual reports. The 1926 code did not only recommend severe measures but equally decreed that some former class one and two teachers be demoted to class three. The then director of education, Mr. Hussey in 1930 introduced a new set of teaching rules that appeared to demote teachers who had long years of teaching experience and indeed made it

difficult for them to qualify for higher pay under the new code. Thus, the teachers responded by first coming together under the umbrella of Nigeria Union of Teachers (NUT) to foster continued well-being of members and guarantee their survival against the unpredictable and at times hostile and draconian policies of the then colonial government.

Fafunwa (1974) observed that, about this period, failure to clarify the extent to which a teacher could claim the status of a civil servant was already a constant source of frustration prior to the year 1930, when the code became operational. A major teachers' conflict therefore occurred in 1931 when the colonial government initiated a cut in grants-in-aid, resulting in pay cut of teachers. The effect of this action led to the mobilization of teachers, first from the southern Nigerian cities for appropriate organized move in response to this. This action must have justified the claim that the distribution or allocation of scarce resources is the major source of conflict in human society.

Nwabueze (1995) noted that the NUT as the umbrella organization for all teachers teaching at the primary and secondary school levels is a powerful instrument which is used to preserve the dignity of teachers which influences their actions and behaviours. Since the roles of teachers in any educational set-up cannot be over-emphasized, it is pertinent to continuously articulate strategies for re-examining disagreements between teachers and governmental institutions for possible quick resolutions. Resolution of inherent conflicts is always seen as an impetus for societal advancement as Kano (1990), had stressed the importance of pressure groups as necessary for the remote planning and direction of curriculum innovation.

Within the decades comprising 1980 and 1990, Nigeria witnessed quite a number of teachers' strike actions in which case government saw reasons and shifted grounds a little in meeting the teachers' demands. For instance, as reported by Nwabueze (1995), the 1st December 1992 to 30th January, 1993 strike action embarked upon by teachers in the primary and secondary schools nation wide following the breakdown of negotiations between the Federal Government and NUT over the reversion of the funding and management of primary education under Decree 3 of 1991 and other allied matters, paralyzed the entire school system. Consequently, school children were forced out of school, where many aimlessly roamed the streets and engaged in all sorts of undesirable and deviant activities. Other unions within the teaching profession have had equal share of conflicts with government over unmet demands to improve education. The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in Nigeria has been in the fore-front in the fight for the improvement of the funding of Universities. This has particularly resulted in prolonged conflicts where universities have remained closed. Teachers and other categories of staff that ought to have been trained in universities for the implementation of vital education programmes may not have had the full benefits of such opportunities.

Continued strike actions have not only affected the stability of the school system and the interests of the students and pupils but have also seriously threatened the integrity of the machinery for the settlement of industrial disputes. Issues that could easily be absorbed and cleared in the local areas often assumed national dimensions while minor disagreements that were allowed to spread eventually polarized and paralyzed the whole sector. Consequently, once rival positions hardened, it became extremely difficult to avoid the polarization that ensued.

MANAGEMENT OF TEACHERS' CONFLICT IN NIGERIA'S DEMOCRACY FOR A SOUND AND SUSTAINABLE UBE PROGRAMME

Dewey (1966), observed that in a democracy, everyone is recognized as being one of the people, a person worthy of the same kind of dignified status that is earned by those considered exceptional, fully sensitive, morally good, and responsible enough to wisely use a large measure of freedom. The development of the meaning of democracy has emanated from a more extended consideration of the proper aim of a democratic government such as to ensure that each individual has a fair and equal chance to live fully as a conscious and self-directing person. In a democracy such as that being experienced in Nigeria, people should have a say in the management of democratic organs. This implies that the organization of schools should reflect democratic tenets

where school heads, staff members, parents and other such co-operating agents who are stakeholders exercise significant say in the running and management of educational institutions.

In Nigeria, the emerging trend of teachers' conflict seems to be narrowed down to a multiplicity of factors which border on:

- (a) The push-pull forces based on incentives and relativity of conditions of service.
- (b) Low career prospects which have led to 'dumping' in the teaching profession.
- (c) The all-powering need to satisfy self-upgrading and improvement through further education and training.
- (d) The need to improve on the funding of education.

Osunde and Ellis (1986) observed that the teaching profession in Nigeria was unattractive, owing to such problems as low salaries, inadequate working facilities and lack of clearly defined promotion criteria for teachers. This observation may have summarized the four areas of teachers' conflict that have for long time created crisis in the education sector. Although, a comprehensive approach to conflict prevention and resolution is required in the education system where co-operating agents can play important roles and government takes initiatives and responsibilities. This is because education as a social service is to be provided not only free but adequately by government, as indicated in the constitution of the country.

The following areas can be helpful in the prevention and resolution of conflicts as the Universal Basic Education (UBE) is implemented.

(a) Control of Entry

The knowledge and training essential for the teaching profession should be specified so that control of entry into the profession is possible. In Nigeria, there are such bodies as, medical and engineering councils where qualified professionals are admitted into, to enable them practice. Teachers in Nigeria agitated for the establishment of a Teachers' Registration Council (TRC). Some two years ago, this issue was the subject of a strike action embarked upon by teachers. Thus, government has responded to the teachers' request and finally established the TRC to regulate teachers' entry and conduct. Such a body will control the entry of unqualified teachers into the profession and unwarranted conducts thereby giving the teaching profession the required dignity while guaranteeing high standard in education. Where untrained teachers still practice, may be due to the shortage of teachers, but the distinction will have been made. Disparity in remuneration between trained and untrained teachers will certainly enhance the popularity and viability of the TRC and eventually give hope to members of the teaching profession.

(b) Condition of Service

A situation in which a professional association is very active is when its focus covers conditions of service. Professional associations are often eager to secure adequate pensions, good tenure, and the chance of promotion and a minimum of extraneous duties for their members. This has been more especially true of those professions whose members are employed by the State. The teachers' associations, especially the NUT have paid considerable attention to conditions of service in Nigeria. This is because conditions have been very bad for teachers practicing in Nigeria. For instance, the NUT has battled with government for adequate pensions for its members. As a matter of prevention of conflict, there is the need to address it and arrive at a reasonable balance with the teachers.

The Nigerian teachers are working in an economy with a 'volatile' base and with limited financial resources that need to be shared by many more necessary national projects. The school infrastructures are fragile and the learning situations are poor. The very large scale of educational system in Nigeria seriously limits opportunities for promotion, so that many capable and ambitious teachers feel that their chances of professional growth are stunted. Therefore, if the teacher must see his work as a duty as well as contribution to both the progress of education and

national development, he must be properly motivated and given a sense of mission. Besides, democratic education (being committed to fairness, liberty and consideration of others' interest) also implies that much career prospects should be given to teachers as is consistent with the pursuit of their work objectives.

(c) Mobilization of our Societal Organizational Structures

There is the need to approach the issue of conflict resolution by team spirit of existing societal organizational structures. Efforts geared up by such organizations as Old Boys Associations, P.T.As, NGOs and similar ones in the form of both human and material resources can make up for the short-fall in the efforts of government to improve education. A governmental machinery to sensitize the civil society in this regard is most ideal. Government no doubt cannot shoulder adequately the course of education for the citizenry. It is capital intensive for a country with such dwindling economic fortunes.

(d) Government's Funding of Education

Our past as a nation has revealed that the most volatile and contentious factor in conflict has always been that of finance or distribution of scarce resources. Education, as a sector had its equal share of this. Education is placed under the concurrent list in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. This implies that, funding and management of education is the responsibility of the three tiers of government. To ensure quality in the school system as this programme is being implemented, funds need to be adequately and promptly released by the relevant agencies and governments. One problem associated with funding is that of teachers' salaries. In the past, teachers have had to go without salaries for months and the responses have been strike actions. Since the teachers are the vital resources needed to implement the U.B.E programme, the payment of their entitlements should not only be uppermost but in consonance with those of other professionals enjoying due privilege. This may not only minimize the occurrences of conflict but will create "softer grounds" for negotiation with the practitioners in the teaching field in the event of disagreements.

(e) Experts Engagement in Resolution Efforts:

Experience has shown that resolution efforts of government in Nigeria have not always demonstrated the desired efficacies in the demand for explicit obliteration of conflict. Government has often insisted on the inclusion of its personnel that often do not see issues as objectively as to understand the points of view of those on the opposing side. Such government personnel who often are not experts in the education sector usually create intractable positions by rendering such discussions difficult to make progress on. Since conflicts are normal and indeed re-occurring phenomena, as related to the implementation of the U.B.E programme in Nigeria, it is suggested that emerging conflicts be handled by experts and those of objective minds so as to arrive at meaningful understanding within short time.

Conclusion

In order to maximize effectiveness in conflict resolution, it is imperative to harness the existing societal organizations to minimize the occurrences of conflicts in the educational system. Government on the other hand should take the initial step to serve as an umbrella body for the resolution of conflicts in the education sector. Funding needs to be adequate and prompt, while teachers' morale should be boosted to enhance their motivation for high productivity. As we continue to develop and articulate the methods and means to prevent incessant crisis in the education systems, our ability to successfully undertake these preventive efforts will undoubtedly improve.

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