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THE PERCEIVED ROLE OF LITERACY AND ITS ATTENDANT PROBLEMS IN NIGERIA

by Prosper Godonoo

Many countries have sought to increase literacy among their populations, and the rationale for such efforts usually involves the notion "achieving universal schooling, as well as effecting conditions of improved sanitation, economic production, and community development."¹ Attempts at increasing the level of literacy in many countries have often involved the expansion of educational programs (in particular primary schooling) and the creation of literacy programs and campaigns.

The subject of illiteracy in my view has political overtones, especially for politicians in developing countries. This is because in most of these countries great significance is sometimes attached to the problem of illiteracy, at least in political speeches or slogans, even though the authors of these speeches or slogans are aware that they will not take the appropriate steps to completely eradicate illiteracy in their societies. For example, in Ghana in the recent past, one political party which eventually formed the government emphasized the importance of adult education during its election campaign and claimed it "will see to it that a planned campaign to liquidate illiteracy from Ghana in the shortest possible time is vigorously undertaken."²

One would assert that Nigeria's politicians cannot be exonerated from making deceptive statements about illiteracy. The Nigerian Federal Military Government vowed ". . .to eliminate mass illiteracy in the country in no distant time when they assumed forced administrative power."³ To date, these efforts have not been successful; instead, illiteracy is increasing in Nigeria with "illiteracy rates for men and women standing at 76% and 94% respectively."⁴

In this paper, I will attempt to render an overview of the role that literacy plays in shaping or moulding the Nigerian community. This is because literacy is viewed as a means through which such societal ills as poverty, destitution, etc. can be alleviated, thereby serving as a tool for societal and individual improvement. In discussing the perceived role of literacy in Nigeria, I will first examine the history of literacy, after which I will give a brief synopsis of the relationship between literacy and development within the Nigerian context. Having set the stage I will then proceed to examine an educational structure which is known as the 6-3-3-4 program in Nigeria, with a view to unveiling some of the inherent constraints or obstacles that are associated with planning, forecasting, and implementing educational programs in Nigeria. I will

then conclude by rendering some suggestions or strategies that could help improve the task of effecting changes in the educational system.

Emergence of Multiple "Literacies"

The word "literacy" is often used as if it refers to one real and singular thing having an evident and identical meaning for everyone in every circumstance. In fact the word "literacy" could mean a variety of things. In view of the multiplicity of meanings that could emerge with the use of the term, a number of questions need to be asked so as to get at which of the meanings is intended. For instance, we could ask whether "literacy" is a measure of actual proficiency, or if it is a synonym for some level of schooling, a socially-ascribed status, or a "charter effect."⁵

If the term indicates proficiency, what kind of proficiency is meant by it? Does the word refer to reading and writing alone or does it include "numeracy" as well? Besides, in the world of work, doesn't there exist a whole range of technical literacies, such as literacy in traditional medicine, in mechanics, traditional as well as western, modern parenthood, and the like? Given the whole range of meanings that the term connotes, it is fascinating to encounter authors who argue extensively about literacy and its attributes in varying forms. For instance, one author asserts:

To be literate is to "speak" and "listen" to a whole new class of people—those whom we know only through text—compared with listening [to conversation]; reading therefore is more likely to encourage people to adopt a critical stance toward their own experience. In view of the discussion, literacy is nothing else than our ability to deal with discourse that projects a world.⁶

"True literacy," in Tuman's view, is thus a sort of "verbal praxis"—that is, an encounter between thought and reality, between desire and possibility—that takes place in the symbolic realm, thereby vastly multiplying human capacity to process, analyze, criticize, and re-invent experience. People who write and read without praxis do not show marked cognitive change. It seems that Tuman gives a dynamic "life" to the notion of literacy as being a phenomenon that is experiencing a constant change.

Whatever literacy really represents, in my view, its practical meaning and historical usage are socially determined. This is because literacy can be defined in a very class-centered way, serving to buttress the power of dominant groups in societies. It can therefore be argued that "the meaning of literacy depends upon the social institutions in

which it is embedded."⁷ A fundamental question that needs to be asked at this stage and which emanates from the social sphere is: to what extent is literacy a technology of communication, or, is it simply a ceremonially-granted status that serves as a protection for the privileged few in societies?

The history of the emergence of literacy (in the western tradition) suggests three primary uses to which this new technology of communication was put; namely, commerce, state bureaucracy, and religious organization. This is because the use of the written word typically spread along avenues of commerce, religious proselytization, and political expansion. These modalities of change were often linked to one another, as in the case of the networks of Islamic merchants who disseminated both their religion and the Arabic script along the trade routes. The Christian missionaries, with their educational vocation(s), preceded or closely followed the growth of the British, French, and American economic empires globally.⁸

The insights offered by this overview of the phenomenon of literacy provide a rationale for attempting to garner a universally-accepted definition of literacy. There have been various definitions for the term "literacy," but for the purpose of brevity, I shall use those of Bhola as a working definition. According to one of Bhola's definitions of "literacy," a person is literate "when s/he can, with understanding, both read and write a short statement on his/her everyday life."⁹ Recognizing the inadequacies of the above definition, Bhola puts forward a second one which says, "to be functionally literate, an individual must be able to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning within his/her community and also being able to use reading, writing, and calculations for his/her own development and the development of his/her country."¹⁰

From the above definitions, it can be inferred that the relativity of the terms "literacy" and "illiteracy" is not in dispute, since "functional literacy" is assumed to go beyond the acquisition of the three Rs to the acquisition of skills necessary for effective functioning in society. However, those skills may change from one society to another. But given the fact that the world economic system is predominantly one that dons a capitalist gown, for purposes of speedy interactions or transactions economically and, to some extent, politically, there is need for the existence of a common link (or common medium of symbolic expression). This link is established through the adoption of the western notion of literacy which brings with it its own "values," hence the need to briefly examine the political economy of literacy.

The emergence of political economy in academic circles in the recent past has brought renewed attention to bear on the question of who controls the definition of "knowledge" and "literacy" in any given

society, and who decides how this socially-constructed reality would be administered. The intriguing revelations that emerge from such inquiries suggest various forces and players which work in concert in determining the nature of available reading materials, the curriculum of schools, and the relations and relative status of various forms of basic education—primary schooling, non-formal education, secondary and higher education. It is against this background that the Nigerian experience of 6-3-3-4 system of education will be examined. It may be helpful to start with a background to the 6-3-3-4 system of education.

Background

The notion of the 6-3-3-4 system of education has been in existence in Nigeria for some time. The genesis of this system could be traced to a 1969 national conference of educators, which dealt with the curricula of the schools. The conference itself was a result of criticisms leveled against the missionary and the British colonial educational system in Nigeria for being irrelevant to the needs and aspirations of Nigeria, especially in the modern post-independence era.

The old system of education which was the 6-5-2-3 structure, inherited from the British colonial masters entailed six years of primary education, five years of secondary education, two years of post-secondary education (Higher School Certificate/School of Basic Studies), and three to five years of higher education.

This old system of education was basically academic and non-vocational in nature. The curriculum content mainly emphasized reading, writing, English language, history, geography, religion and theoretical science, to the neglect of applied science, technology, agriculture, professional training, arts and crafts, music, commerce, and business studies, which were essential for national development.¹¹

The 6-5-2-3 structure was criticized for various reasons, some of which relate to:

1. the scope of the curricula,
2. the appropriateness of the learning experiences provided in the school system
3. the adequacy of materials and facilities,
4. the applicability and adaptation of the knowledge acquired in schools to actual situations in the society, and
5. the quality of the outputs in terms of students.¹²

The demand for change by concerned members of the general public based on the inherent shortcomings in the old structure, formed the basis for introducing the 6-3-3-4 educational system in Nigeria. The

structure of the new system suggests six years of primary education, three years of junior secondary school, three years of senior high school, and four years of university education.¹³

In the new system, the primary school curriculum would comprise subjects like language arts (language of the immediate community and English), mathematics, social studies, elementary science, cultural arts, health education, physical training, religious and moral instruction, agricultural science, and home economics. The major area of change is in the content. Unlike the former primary education, the new curriculum stresses science, agriculture, social studies, social norms, creative and musical activities, local craft, and languages. Because of the nature of the new subjects, specialist teachers would be required in the primary schools. Suitable facilities and equipment, particularly for sciences—including agricultural science—would be needed.

For the Junior secondary schools the following subjects are included in the curriculum: mathematics, English, two Nigerian languages, science, social studies, art and music, practical agriculture, religion and moral instruction, and physical education. Other subjects are: woodwork, metal work, electronics and mechanics, local crafts, home economics, and business studies.

At the completion of the three year course at the secondary level, a state-wide selection examination is expected to be conducted to select those students who would be willing and are able to continue to the senior secondary school level of education. The others are expected to be awarded junior high school certificate, which would enable them to go into an apprenticeship or into the labor market. They are expected to possess some marketable skills.

In the senior secondary school, the core subjects are: English, one Nigerian language, mathematics, physics, chemistry or biology, English literature, history or geography, and agricultural science or a vocational subject. The electives (out of which students are expected to select any three, depending on their intended fields) are: physics, chemistry, additional maths, commerce bookkeeping, typing, shorthand, history, literature, geography, agriculture, home economics, Bible knowledge, Islamic studies, technical drawing, woodwork, auto-mechanics, music, art, French, physical and health sciences, and government.¹⁴

The senior secondary school is expected to last for three years and it is probably for a fewer number of students. The transition rate from junior secondary to senior secondary is to be determined by each state in Nigeria, and the decision is expected to be based on available resources.

At the tertiary level of education, especially in the polytechnics and colleges of technology, the emphasis is expected to be on technological education. The subjects to be taught in such schools include engineering, building, electronics, metallurgy, architecture, town planning, surveying, business and secretarial studies, laboratory and marine technology, agricultural science, etc.

The universities, though retaining their broad disciplines of arts, social studies, and natural sciences, are expected to also shift emphasis to science and technology and professional studies, especially in the newly established federal government universities of technology.¹⁵ At all levels of the new structure of education, it seems utility-oriented subjects have been incorporated into the curriculum, such that students who terminate their education at any stage of the educational system could always find something to do for employment in the society.

The 6-3-3-4 plan was designed to be structurally and quantitatively different from the existing structure by being both functional and practical in fulfilling the five main national objectives, and they are:

1. a free and democratic society,
2. a just and egalitarian society,
3. a united, strong and self-reliant nation
4. a great and dynamic economy, and
5. a land full of opportunity for all citizens.¹⁶

Laudable as this new system of education may seem in meeting the educational demands and priorities of Nigeria, many factors may arise during the actual implementation of the program that can pose serious threats to the survival of the system and to national development.

For instance, education in Nigeria is a highly politicized affair, with politicians often using it as a canvassing tool during election campaigns. People with little or no administrative experience in the management of educational institutions hold the positions of Ministers of Education.¹⁷ Such people often take binding decisions on educational issues without possessing the appropriate skills and competence required of educational planners. They turn educational policies and issues into an arena of political aggrandizement of those in office, thereby allowing, in most cases, political considerations to always take precedence over technical ones.

Furthermore, educational planning and implementation in Nigeria has often been hampered with statistical constraints. Usually, planners and administrators do not have accurate figures with which to work. Thus their projections of student enrollments, teacher projections, space, and facility requirements are often faulty. Because

of using such inaccurate data in the planning process, numerous problems later occur during the implementation stage. For example, during the implementation of the Universal Primary Education scheme in Nigeria, it was projected that "2.3 million students would register during the first year of the program in 1976. It was however observed that over 8 million students registered."¹⁸ This difference between the projected and the actual figures created a lot of unforeseen problems in the areas of manpower requirement, classroom accommodation, and general facilities. Similar inherent problems, which were connected with the universal primary education with regard to inappropriate planning, seem to be looming around the new 6-3-3-4 structure. While the new structure was expected to commence in 1982, evidence shows that the new system of education is yet to be implemented in many parts of the country, and for various reasons. A recent survey reveals that "apart from states like Anambra and Kano, almost all the others have either delayed the take-off of the scheme or altered its format as a result of several constraints."¹⁹ Some of these constraints will be examined below.

Financial Constraints. Finance has always been an impeding factor in the history of Nigeria's planning, development, and implementation of educational programs. An outline of the financial problems associated with ANY educational reform in Nigeria are observed to be:

1. the underestimation of the financial costs of identified educational programs,
2. the overestimation of anticipated financial resources to fund programs,
3. over-reliance on external assistance,
4. excessive wastage of funds on irrelevant projects, and
5. misplacement of manpower priorities.²⁰

The financial implications and problems of the 6-3-3-4 structure seem to be related to the need for completely developing new human and material resources for the pre-vocational subjects that have been introduced into the curriculum. In Nigeria, the state governments bear the main responsibility of financing secondary education. The federal government's subvention to this level of education is very minimal, and since the junior secondary school component of the 6-3-3-4 system is expected to involve vastly increased demands in financing it is not surprising that many of the states are yet to implement the 6-3-3-4 policy.²¹

It was suggested that "the new 6-3-3-4 policy was conceived during a period of buoyant economy in Nigeria, but was expected to be born or delivered in a period of tight economic realities."²² This might help in explaining the difficulties being experienced by the various state governments in implementing the new educational scheme.

Human resource constraint. The success of the 6-3-3-4 system of education will depend to a great extent on the availability of the human teaching resources with respect to quality and quantity. The projections of teacher supply and teacher/student ratio was not encouraging, to say the least, in that "a 40% transition rate from primary to junior secondary school was projected; in addition, an average class size of 35, with a student/teacher ratio of 23:1 and an attrition rate of teachers of 10% per year, was said to require a total number of about 114,927 additional teachers for the JSS. And of this projected requirement, only 45,656 teachers were available."²³ Furthermore, based on other projections, Nigeria was "expected to have enrolled about 14 million students at the primary level of education in 1982. The overall student population in the SS was expected to be more than 3,636,390 by 1985 due to the old structure of education that was expected to usher in the transition."²⁴ In view of the above discussion, there is no doubt that there would exist an enormous student population in Nigeria, yearning for the attention of a pool of qualified teachers.

In the domain of quality manpower constraints touch upon the question of the quality of teachers with respect to their training, qualifications and predispositions, the relevance of their training to their assigned duties, and the quality of their performance on the job.

It has been observed that "55% of the teachers in the primary schools in Nigeria were not in possession of the necessary certificates or qualifications while at the secondary level, the number of professionally trained teachers was less than 30%."²⁵ It may be of interest to state that there has been a purge in the teaching service in Nigeria in the recent past. With the recent purge in the teaching service in the whole country, the percentage of teachers in the states without necessary certificates or qualifications has fallen, but not necessarily with the accompanying increase in the percentage of qualified teachers.

The comprehensive nature of the curriculum of the new system of education in Nigeria seems to call for a new breed of teachers with a through theoretical and applied knowledge of the subject matter which is to be taught. While the existing teacher training institutions may be able to produce an adequate number of teachers for the academic subjects (if they were to double their yearly output), the supply of technical teachers for the vocational and pre-vocational subjects seems to remain a problem, thereby hindering the proper implementation of the 6-3-3-4 structure.

At present, there are only two technical teachers' colleges in Nigeria, located at Yaba, in Lagos State, and Gombe, in Bauchi state. The annual capacity of these two schools is inadequate to cater for the required numbers of technical and commercial subjects in all of the states in Nigeria.

In a bid to meet the shortfall of technical teachers, several suggestions have been made. For instance, some authors suggest hiring foreign teachers for the schools, and also using local craftsmen and other uncertified teachers. But, each of these suggestions has its attending consequences and problems.²⁶ Recruiting teachers who have been trained in a different country and in different socio-cultural milieu would indicate that Nigeria is yet again importing a foreign educational system to solve its needs. These foreign teachers would undoubtedly be trained to use methodologies, strategies, and facilities that are foreign to the Nigerian school environment. It is not likely that the long-term goal of achieving the objectives of the 6-3-3-4 system will be fulfilled because it will be somewhat difficult for the teachers to facilitate the active teaching-learning process under conditions which are different from where they were trained. There would be need for a lot of adaptation, but the key question is: are there (or will there be) mechanisms readily available to facilitate such adaptation with little or no frustrations?

Using local craftsmen and uncertified teachers in the schools to teach some of the vocational subjects could be viewed as a plausible proposition. However, these local talents will have to be developed by way of orientation and training in pedagogical and language skills to enable them function effectively. It is inappropriate, in my view, to recruit a number of craftsmen into any school system to teach without effecting a change in their orientation. The "rawness" that these local talents might bring along with them may diminish some of the favorable outcomes of other subject areas like English.

The 6-3-3-4 system of education stipulates various activities and requirements that must be provided at various levels of the structure in order that the objectives of the system be attained. For instance, the nature of the subjects in the curriculum of the new system presupposes that infrastructure, laboratories, workshops, classrooms, textbook, equipment, physical facilities, and teaching aids will be provided to implement the scheme successfully.

Judging from the present predicament of the schools in Nigeria, the various state governments do not seem to be in any hurry to provide the facilities to the schools. Funds, if at all available, are expended on other recurrent expenditures like teachers' salaries and administrative costs. A recent survey in the educational expenditure reveals that capital expenditure which covers the areas of buildings and facilities is often

assigned less than five per cent of the entire educational budget.²⁷ From the above discussion, it seems difficult for state governments to fully implement the new 6-3-3-4 structure.

Environmental constraints. The majority of adult Nigerians seem to lack full knowledge of the goals and objectives of the 6-3-3-4 scheme. This situation could be attributed to inadequate publicity. Owing to the inadequacy of publicity on the new scheme, many members of the public are not educated on the purposes and intentions of the new policy. As a result, some parents frown on and also develop a negative attitude towards their children when informed that the children are (or would be) specializing in the technical aspects of the 6-3-3-4 scheme.²⁸ Most parents do not seem to be enthusiastic when informed that their children would be dropping out from school at the junior secondary level for the world of work. There is a common belief that those who go into such professions as those of a carpenter, mechanic, electrician, etc. are dropouts and rejects. Hence they are socially stigmatized as misfits and liabilities.

Strategies for Improvement

The school is a social system which interacts with and influences a lot of variables within the environmental setting. As a result, the school receives a set of inputs in the form of people, ideas, designs, materials, equipment, finance, etc. from the society, for its various functions. It is designed to produce students and services aimed at fulfilling the needs of the labor market. In my view, to achieve effectiveness and efficiency in the new 6-3-3-4 educational system in Nigeria, there is need for a continuous, extensive and strategic planning. Policy makers should take into consideration the socio-economic and political needs of Nigeria, and also the needs of individuals within the states, for whom the system is expected to generate multiple benefits. Without such considerations, most policies would not survive the test of time and, as such, would die prematurely.

Furthermore, in planning for a nation-wide implementation of the new policy, attention should be focussed on identifying the quality of appropriate educational inputs, determining the quality of the pedagogic skills and strategies that are in use in the schools at the time, establishing relationship between the inputs and outputs of the educational system, and using planning methods or models that involve assessment of manpower requirements, rate of return, cost benefit analysis, and cost effectiveness techniques.

The above suggestions, if properly considered and executed, would help in revealing the extent to which the pre-determined goals and

objectives of the new structure would be met. Furthermore, increased efforts should be made by all concerned with the progress of education in Nigeria to attain optimum efficiency in educational management and organization. This suggestion calls for an effective management, utilization, and mass enlightenment of the members of the entire Nigerian public on the purposes, intents, and means of achieving any new policy, the 6-3-3-4 policy included.

In conclusion, I would assert that it is only through a careful planning of an educational system that the much cherished hope of societal transformation through literacy can materialize in Nigeria. Besides, not until various politicians and policy makers desist from politicizing education at the expense of the vast majority of Nigerians would literacy "effectively improve the lot of Nigerians, improve their productive capacity, instil the virtues of tolerance, patience, and understanding in all the citizens, while enabling Nigerian leaders to be loyal, patriotic and honest persons worth emulating."²⁹

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