

Promoting Education As Basic Human Right In Nigeria: Being Part of the Solution
Keynote Address by Dr. Cyril O. Enwonwu, Professor, University of Maryland
at Baltimore; and Research ! America Global Health Ambassador
At the 15th Annual Convention of Christ the King College Alumni Association in America,
Hilton Long Island/Huntington, New York, USA
30 July, 2011

Mr. Emmanuel Onua, President, CKC – AAA,
Members of the National Executive, CKC – AAA,
Mr. Ralph A. Perkins of the Leon H. Sullivan Foundation, Washington, DC
Mr. Roland Ewubare, Executive Secretary and Head of the Nigeria National Human
Rights Commission,
Distinguished Alumni of CKC, Onitsha, Nigeria
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a special honor to be invited by my colleagues to give the alumni keynote address at this year's Plenary Session, as well as the Convention and Charles Okoye Memorial address later in the evening. As a proud alumnus of this famous Catholic Secondary School East of the River Niger in Onitsha, Nigeria, I accept your kind invitation with special delight.

In the last one year, several of our school colleagues transited to Eternity. Most recently was Sir Anthony Aniagolu, a highly respected legal luminary and retired Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of Nigeria. Distinguished Guests and Colleagues, I request that we stand and observe a one-minute silence in honor of our Departed Alumni. May their Souls Rest in Perfect Peace.

Education as a basic right

The United Nations General Assembly, at a meeting held in Paris, France in 1948, adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). In its preambles, Article 26 of UDHR emphasizes that "Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality". The right to education and the teaching of human rights education are

intertwined with each other. When UDHR was adopted in 1948, only Egypt, Ethiopia and Liberia were the African countries voting in support. For obvious reasons, at the time, South Africa abstained from voting. The other African countries were at the time under colonial rule. With attainment of political independence, these countries subsequently embraced the major human rights treaties of the UN, and the charters of Organization of African Unity and the Africa Union. It must be stated that most of the African countries are regrettably not proud examples of human rights conduct. For example, Nigeria subscribed to UDHR on joining the UN in 1960. Nonetheless, in November 2010, the ECOWAS Community Court in Abuja ordered Nigeria to provide free education to every child, thus emphasizing that free education is a legal entitlement of every citizen child. The suit was instituted by the Registered Trustees of the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP).

Nigeria: Brief Profile – With an estimated population of 150 million, Nigeria is a country of puzzling contradictions where the majority residing in the rural areas, and in overcrowded urban slums still lack the basic essentials of life, while the few, relatively affluent, educated individuals engage in gluttonous lifestyles. Using the international poverty benchmark of US\$ 1.00 per day, the current estimated poverty rate in the country is about 54.5%, although figures as high as 70% have been cited. In effect, no less than 82 million Nigerians are poor. It must be emphasized that definition of poverty in purely economic terms usually ignores other related confounding components such as access to adequate foods, safe drinking water, and health services, as well as the capacity of the poor individuals to improve their adverse conditions. Good education is a major weapon in the prosecution of the battles against ignorance, diseases, and poverty. The adult literacy rate in Nigeria, reported to vary between 67 – 72% in 2009 by the UN Development Programme, is now down to about 57 percent.

When we were growing up in Nigeria, most of us were not fed with the proverbial golden spoon. Rather, we were exposed to reasonably well-structured education and social systems, and admonished by our teachers to work hard to guarantee our future and that of our community and country. In those days, we just did not pass through the good schools. The schools passed through us, thereby instilling certain important values in most of us. Today, the future of Nigeria as a nation is under serious threat by erosion of our educational foundations and values

[Kazeem K, Ige O. Redressing the growing concern of the education sector in

Nigeria, Edo J Counselling, 2010; 3:40-49]. The depreciation in our values is now at a dangerously low level as exemplified by the UNICEF's recent report that an estimated 33 million Nigerians (about 22 percent of the country) defecate in open places [Nigerian Vanguard June 29, 2011], depositing about 1.7 metric tons of feces into the environment annually. This despicable behavior promotes high morbidity and mortality rates from numerous infections.

The Golden Era of Education in Nigeria

The years prior to the Civil War in Nigeria, but certainly before the oil boom, were characterized by good quality education at all levels (early childhood, primary, secondary, and tertiary). Relatively free quality education policy was introduced in most of the Western Region, including Lagos. At the primary and secondary school levels in virtually all the Regions in the country, there was intense healthy competition/rivalry between the various schools regardless of their denominational affiliations. Teachers were highly motivated, and generally, there was very cordial teacher-student relationship ----- a situation very conducive to learning. In the typical primary schools which many of us attended, teachers in the upper classes often gave up their free time voluntarily to provide extra coaching for the academically weak students after the normal school hours. Their main motivation was to make sure that their students performed better than students from other schools in the highly competitive entrance examinations to the choice secondary schools. Good reading culture was encouraged among the students at all levels, but particularly in the secondary schools where students were often given some reading assignments during the long vacations.

Organized religion featured prominently in the educational curriculum of many of the schools at all levels. Indiscipline, e.g. lateness to classes and other forms of misbehavior were discouraged. Teacher/student ratio per class was carefully calibrated to promote optimal learning. There was no automatic promotion at the end of the school year. Students failing to make satisfactory academic progress at the end of the school year were constrained to repeat the class. In our time at CKC, not all students who enrolled in Form One continued to Form 5 and the Cambridge Oversea School Leaving Certificate Examination (subsequently replaced by the West African Senior School Certificate Examination, WASSCE). Many students, at least 30% of the entering class, were weeded out at the Form 3 or 4 levels, and assisted in securing gainful appointments in the colonial service as postal clerks, or technical officers in

training at the Public Works Department. In our era, many of the Secondary Schools recorded 90 to 100% success rates in the Cambridge Oversea School Leaving Certificate Examination.

Present decline in educational standards

Education in Nigeria at all levels has witnessed a slow but steady decline in recent decades, and we must try to understand the reasons to be able to take appropriate corrective measures.

The period birth to 5 years is very important in terms of learning for a child. In many Nigerian communities, regardless of income level, parents have unfortunately abandoned the important responsibility of caring for the infants to inexperienced maids/house helps. Statistics suggest that less than 10 per cent of Nigerian children eligible for Early Childhood Education (ECD) have access to the services.

At the primary and secondary school levels, students are now educated under very difficult conditions, e.g. insufficient school materials, poorly equipped libraries and laboratories, poor student welfare system, etc. Public schools with initial capacities for 200 students are suddenly forced to accommodate several-fold that number without commensurate physical expansion. Undue political interference in smooth running of public schools is quite frequent. A recent example was the directive by the Federal Government that all public schools should be closed for one month for voter registration during the 2011 General Elections. The children were not eligible to vote. Many schools in the rural and urban areas lack requisite buildings and furniture for the students. Power supply is erratic, and most of the schools lack adequate water supply, audio-visual facilities, etc. There is shortage of qualified, well-motivated teachers, and many of the teachers spend a good deal of their time conducting private businesses during school hours.

Because of lack of opportunities for professional/intellectual growth, many of the teachers in the secondary schools, like their contemporaries in tertiary institutions, decay or undergo what educators describe as the “obsolescence of decline of competence”. This is a phenomenon described as “human decapitalization” by the economists. The very sad educational situation in our secondary schools was recently exemplified by the mass failures in WASSCE for the years 2008 – 2010 where less than 23 – 35% of the candidates obtained credit levels in English language, Mathematics

and three other subjects. Similar dismal performances were also recorded in the November 2010 Examinations (SSCE) as released by the National Examination Council. At a recent 2010 Symposium, a former governor of Lagos State (Alhaji Lateef Jakande) rightly was shocked by the reported observation from the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) of Nigeria that there were **23 million** children out of school ---- a figure more than two to three – fold the population of some countries.

Many of the factors precipitating decay of previous high values in Nigeria elementary and secondary education systems were also responsible for the crisis in the tertiary institutions. The sources have been eloquently described in the 30th Anniversary Public Lecture of the University of Lagos delivered by the Late Dr. Pius Okigbo, a distinguished economist and an alumnus of CKC. The sources he identified then still hold true today. They include involvement of university campuses in urban guerrilla warfare associated with national political violence/thuggery, and unplanned rapid explosion in numbers of tertiary institutions with resultant overcrowding in the dormitories and classrooms. Respected academicians in Universities lost their place in society with the oil boom and the re-calibration of moral values in monetary terms. Chieftaincy titles assumed more importance than academic excellence. During the Military Government in Nigeria, mediocrity was enthroned at all levels in the tertiary institutions, and quite often, with the active participation of the academicians. As rightly pointed out by Dr. Okigbo, external assessors for academic staff promotions were occasionally chosen for the wrong reasons. Cultism is still a problem in the tertiary institutions, but of late the activities of a fanatical religious group (Boko Haram) are causing major disruption of education in the Nigerian Universities, particularly the Northern States.

Efforts to Redress the Educational Decay

The Government of Nigeria has over the years established several Boards to enforce Minimum Academic Standards for the various educational systems/levels. The management of primary and junior secondary education is the responsibility of the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) established in 2001. The National Board of Technical Education (NBTE) oversees the Polytechnics, and the Universities are monitored by the National Universities Commission (NUC). There is also the National Commission for Colleges of Education. While these Boards are well intentioned, they have been plagued with numerous problems. Some of the problems may derive from poor composition of board memberships. The Boards also mirror

many of the adverse societal problems. Some Members of these Boards are not by education and/or experience qualified to serve on them. They are appointed purely for political considerations and have absolutely no idea of the mission of the institutions they serve.

UNESCO recommends that a standard 26% of the total National Budget be allocated to education as a step toward provision of free, functional education at all levels. The federal government allocation has for many years remained significantly below the recommended level despite the rapid growth in school populations. Solution of the current problems requires immediate infusion of adequate funds to rehabilitate the decayed physical infrastructures in schools, and provide school environments conducive to learning. Power supply to the schools must be regular, and adequate water supply is mandatory. Qualified and well-motivated teachers should be recruited, and provided with incentives such as opportunities for continuing education. Regular parents-teachers meetings attendance to discuss the academic progress of students should be encouraged. The schools should be provided with updated, well-stocked libraries, laboratories and computers/teaching aids as well as facilities for sporting activities. Each school requires the services of students' counselors and nurse practitioners. School uniforms are necessary since they help to foster a sense of pride in the students.

Conclusion

The future of any country rests on today's youths who constitute the next generation of leaders. As rightly underscored by Bruce Alberts¹, "any country that fails to encourage and develop the talent in each individual through its public school systems will suffer greatly, because the quality of a nation depends on the collective wisdom of both its leaders and its citizens". Given the right tools, and good quality education, Nigerian children are more than equal to the tasks ahead.

¹Bruce Alberts, Making a science of education, Science, 2009; 323:15