THE DIPLOMA DISEASE AND THE CHALLENGE OF RECAPTURING THE ESSENCE OF EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF EXAMINATION BODIES.

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Educational systems of developing countries have been receiving a lot of attention not only from the governments of the developing countries but that of multilateral agencies and Development partners such as the World Bank, UNESCO, DFID, the Commonwealth of Learning etc. Indeed there is no developing country that is not receiving some form of assistance from these agencies geared towards the resolution of the problems of education in these countries. The most often cited problems include: inadequate teacher quality and supply, inadequate instructional facilities and infrastructure, regional, social class and gender disparites and the problem of ensuring adequate access and equity. The Dakar Framework of Action on Education For All, has for example set clear targets for the resolution of these problems and the attainment of Education For All by the year 2015.

However it is the contention of this paper that the current efforts to attain the targets of the Dakar Framework though laudable have one fundamental flaw, namely, they tend to ignore the more insidious, more damaging and even less perceptible problem recognized by scholars such as Ron Dore more than a quarter of a century ago.That problem is the Diploma Disease (Dore 1976).

This paper discusses the Diploma Disease in Nigeria. Its major claim is that the Diploma Disease is a serious problem that has reduced the educational enterprise at all levels of the educational system to mere acquisition of certificates of doubtful value and has subtly and almost imperceptively transformed schools and indeed all educational institutions into certificate-issuing factories. It is argued that this subversion of the educational process should be addressed more seriously even as attention is focused on the attainment of the goals of the Dakar Framework of Action and Education For All by the year 2015. In other words, concrete measures should be taken to recapture the essence of education and provide meaningful education that goes beyond the mere issuance of certificates and lengthening the unemployment qeueus and engenders students' personal growth and addresses Nigeria's needs and existential realities. It is contended that even though the Diploma Disease has deeper structural causes located in the country's wider political economy, particularly the education system's colonial and neocolonial pedigrees, assessment and more importantly,

examination bodies do have a duty to improve their techniques as part of a collective effort to deal with the problem posed by the Diploma Disease and help recapture the essence of Education.

The paper has three sections. Section one addresses two issues namely what constitutes the Diploma Disease and what are its manifestations in Nigeria?

These are broad even if difficult philosophical and sociological issues that cannot be addresses fully in this paper and what is attempted is an outline of these issues in such a way that they provide the necessary conceptual background to the understanding of their importance and how a role may be carved out for educational assessment and examination bodies in Nigeria. This conceptual outline is important because the relationship between assessment techniques and the practices of examination Bodies on the one hand and the Dipoma Disease on the other is not so obvious. It needs to be stressed that examination bodies in so far as they have a direct influence on curriculum implementation at the school level and the classroom practices of teachers have a lot to do with the subtle transformation of schools into certificate-issuing factories. If this assertion is correct, (we believe it is), then they do have a role to play in dealing with the problem posed to education in Nigeria by the Diploma Disease.

Section two examines the manifestations of the Diploma Disease in the Nigerian context and draws much of the evidence but by no means all, from the Higher education subsector; while section three makes some very broad recommendations on the role of examination bodies in combatting the Diploma Disease in Nigeria. In examining the role of these bodies it must be stressed that we are not claiming that that it is a sufficient remedy. It is not. Dealing with the Diploma disease will require much more than that and must address the deeper structural causes in the wider political economy that engendered the problem in the first place. This is important because we do not want to be misunderstood as making the claim that the solution lies in transforming the perspectives, techniques and practices of Examination Bodies or for that matter educational assessment. What is claimed however is that any attempt to address the problem cannot ignore the impact of assessment on teaching and learning and the influence of these bodies on teachers' classroom practices and students' expectations and attitudes towards education.

The Diploma Disease and the subversion of Education

Until the publication of Ivan Illich's Deschooling Society in 1971 and Ron Dore's seminal work on the Diploma Disease in 1976, very few scholars have questioned the massive expansion of the school systems of the preceding decades in both the developed and developing countries. There has continued to be an unquestioned faith in the capacity of the schools to "educate" and the dominance of the view of Modernisation theorists in public policy as from the sixties to date, that education promotes economic growth; and an improved level of income and social mobility for the individual; and is therefore a key factor in the economic development of the so called third world countries.

To question the myth that the expansion of the school systems of the third world countries is essential to their socio-economic development, Dore (1976, 1997) first makes the distinction between schooling that educates and schooling that is mere qualification-earning. He writes:

"The effect of schooling, the way it alters a man's capacity and **will** to do things depends not only on what he learns or the way he learns it, but also on **why he learns** it. That is at the basis of the distinction between schooling which is education, and schooling which is only qualification, a mere process of certificating-or "credentialing"……Most people when they speak of "education", have in mind a **process of learning….which has mastery as its object…it is mastery of the knowledge itself which counts**.

In the process of qualification, by contrast, the pupil is concerned not with **mastery** but with **being certified as having mastered**. The knowledge that he gains, he gains not for its own sake and not for constant later use in real life situation- but for the once and for all purpose of reproducing it in an examination. And the learning and reproducing is all just a means to an end- the end of getting a certificate which is a passport to a coveted job, a status, an income. If education is learning **to do a job** qualification is a matter of learning in order **to get a job**." (Dore 1976:8)

The Diploma disease as articulated by Dore (1976, 1997); Dore and Oxenham (1984), Oxenham (1984), Little (1984, 1997) and Fredericks (2001), Wolf (2002), describes a situation in which :

- Despite the rhetoric of intent of the education bureaucracy and the schools, in practice the central concern of students is not real mastery of the subject matter being taught but passing examinations and acquiring certificates that will enable them **get a job**.
- Teachers' and students' practices and expectations respectively focus on preparing for and passing examinations that will enable students acquire certificates and "improve" their life chances. Thus much of what happens in schools is not education but mere qualification earning which is "ritualistic, tedious, suffused with anxiety and boredom, destructive of curiosity and imagination; in short anti-educational". They are in other words **learning to get a job** (which is mere qualification-earning), rather than **learning to do a job** (which is education).
- Qualification-earning becomes more deeply entrenched leading to the phenomenon often referred to as qualification-escalation (i.e. as a result of fewer jobs, the level of certification required to attain these positions rapidly increases); with disastrous consequences for not only the educational system but the social fabric as well. The number of the so-called "qualified" outstrips the available slots in the job market. This in turn engenders the unprecedented growth of unemployment queues as graduate unemployment worsens and constitutes serious security problems for the state.
- Schooling rather than educating is the final outcome of the educational encounter for all those who attended schools: "the so-called educated unemployed have not, in fact, been educated. Nor indeed have the "educated" employed. They have certainly been schooled, but they are the victims of a system of schooling without education".

The Diploma Disease thesis as articulated by Dore and others raises serious questions about the quality of the graduates of schools in developing countries. Are graduates of educational institutions schooled or educated? Are educational institutions taking the business of educating seriously or are they increasingly being transformed into mere certificate-issuing factories?

The Manifestations of the Diploma Disease in Nigeria

Understanding the manifestations of the Diploma Disease in Nigeria would require an analysis of not only the inputs and outputs of the educational system but also the dominant techniques and processes for the transmission of knowledge in educational institutions including the quality of the tuition provided. That would require another paper and therefore what is attempted here is to merely highlight the manifestations of the Diploma Disease in Nigeria. Examples of the phenomenon will be drawn mainly from higher education and only to a limited extent from basic education. We shall in the course of the discussion indicate that part of the problem is that educational policies have been based on one major flawed assumption: that there is a direct relationship between economic development and education.

According to the National Policy on Education (1998), the goals of tertiary education shall be to:

1. contribute to national development through high level relevant manpower training;
2. develop and inculcate proper values for the survival of the individual and society;
3. develop the intellectual capability of individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environments;
4. acquire both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to be self-reliant and useful members of the society;
5. promote and encourage scholarship and community service;
6. forge and cement national unity; and
7. promote national and international understanding and interaction.

These goals betray an implicit faith in the direct link between education and the improvement of individual and national development.

The major manifestations of the Diploma Disease in Nigeria can be categorized into five. These are:

- graduate output outstrips the available modern sector jobs in the economy;
- qualification escalation;
- deterioration of the quality of education;
- low levels of learning achievement; and

- the pre-eminence of the banking concept of education in schools, colleges and universities.

1. In Nigeria as in many developing countries, since the dawn of independence in the sixties there has been a massive expansion of the school system for a variety of reasons, some of which include: the need to provide equal educational opportunities to all social groups; the state's determination to reduce educational disparities (gender, rural-urban, regional, social class etc) inherited from the colonialists and the desire to promote access and equity in education and above all to produce adequate manpower that can facilitate the attainment of the goals and targets set by national development plans. The number of primary schools increased from 15,703 in 1960 to 40,055 in 1996. ..Similarly the number of secondary schools rose from 4236 in 1980 to 6206 in 1998. There was only one university- the university of Ibadan by 1960 but today the number of universities is thirty seven. The tables in appendix 1,2, and3 give an indication of the dramatic increase in enrolments at all levels of education.

   However by the mid-eighties the country was experiencing an over-supply of graduates for whom there are not enough modern sector jobs and graduate unemployment has become a serious social problem. As table 1 .indicates, 47,271.university graduates were produced in the year 1996 alone and the graduate-output for 1997 was 53,941.and enrolment in the universities in 1997 was 371,083. The fact that not more than 20% of university graduates can hope to secure employment seems to have no effect either on the social demand for university education or the enrolments into universities. As Dore (1976:4-5) explains:

   > "The paradox of the situation is that the worse the educated unemployment situation gets and the more useless educational certificates become, the stronger grows the pressure for an expansion of educational facilities…..The mechanism of qualification-escalation ensures that once one is in the modern-sector-qualification range, the higher the educational qualification one gets, the better one's chances of getting **some** job."

2. Qualification escalation

Put simply qualification escalation is the tendency to crave for and achieve higher levels of schooling in order to stay competitive within the job market. For example whereas in Nigeria in the sixties and seventies, an "O" level was enough to guarantee a secondary school graduate a job as a clerk in the public and private sectors, it would now require a National Diploma to secure the same job. Similarly jobs which could be secured with a Diploma now require a first degree. To be more competitive in the job market, those who possess a first degree seek to achieve second or third degrees and so on. But why does qualification escalation persist? It is because of the myth that *"education improves people and that they are getting more value for their money if they get more education*". (Fredericks, 2001). A second factor is that there are few and inadequate number of vacancies in the modern sector of the economy for the number of graduates produced by the schools, universities and colleges.

Qualification escalation in Nigeria has fuelled the demand for more schooling and led to further expansion of part time and full time programmes such that most conventional tertiary institutions offer part time or distance learning programmes in the form of Diploma and Postgraduate programmes in order to meet the insatiable quest for qualifications often of doubtful quality.

3. Deterioration in the Quality of Education

As the social demand for education increases geometrically, governments and politicians are under sustained pressure to establish more schools, colleges and universities, expand the enrolment of existing ones and initiate distance learning programmes so as to promote greater access to education.

The response to the demand for more access has not always been systematic and well planned, particularly with regards to adequate funding of the newly established and already existing institutions. The overstretching of government's resources so as to meet the demand for more access has led to serious underfunding of of schools, colleges and universities which in turn had a negative impact on teacher supply and quality; the provision of laboratories, workshops and classrooms and instructional materials such as books, journals, audio-visual media, etc. Enrolments were dramatically increased without a concomitant expansion of the teaching and learning

facilities; thus engendering the deterioration of quality at all levels of the educational system. (FME and World Bank, 2003).

4 **Low Levels of Learning Achievement**

The deterioration in the quality of education provided in the schools is best indicated by the low levels of learning. For example the Monitoring of Learning Achievement project undertaken by the Federal Government in conjunction with UNESCO/UNICEF, assessed the learning achievement of primary four pupils in Nigeria in the areas of: Numeracy, Literacy and Life Skills. The findings of the project are summarized below:

i. The level of numeracy competence of the pupils was generally very low. The national mean score was 32.2%. The performance of pupils became poorer as we moved from items requiring simple recall through those requiring some understanding of items dealing with problem solving;

ii. The performance in the literacy test was the worst of the three cognitive tests, the level of competency of the pupils in English was very minimal. The national mean score was 25.2% ……. The most outstanding finding in the literacy test was obtained from one of the items which required pupils to copy exactly, a very short passage (about five lines) into a given space. Whereas only 8.1% gave a completely accurate copy of the passage, 39.6% score zero meaning that they did not demonstrate the basic skill of copying one word or punctuation mark correctly.

iii. Performance on life skills was higher than any of the other skill areas; "the national mean score was 36.86%. (FGN/UNESCO/UNICEF 1997)."

These findings are most disturbing, but must have deteriorated further since then, given the worsening of the funding of the education sector and the incessant teachers' strike, particularly university lecturers which sometimes last up to six months.

The Dominance of the Banking Concept of Education

Despite claims to the contrary, teaching and learning at all levels of Nigeria's education system is yet to make the desired transition from teacher-centred approaches which promote rote-learning and memorization to student-centred approaches that promote problem-solving and critical understanding of reality.

Freire's (1970) depiction of what he calls the 'Banking' concept of Education aptly fits the Nigerian situation where: "education is an act of depositing in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and "makes deposits" which the students patiently receive, memorise and repeat. This is the banking concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students' extends only as far as receiving, filing and storing the deposits."

The sole aim of schooling as pointed out earlier in the paper, is not to educate but to enable students pass examinations and obtain certificates that will enable them to get a job. This explains the dominance of rote learning and memorization and the neglect of problem solving and the development of the powers of criticals analysis in the teaching learning process.

Combating the Diploma Disease: The Role of Assessment

There is a growing concensus that examinations do influence curriculum development and teaching and learning in schools. However there is considerable concern about the nature of such influence and its implications for education. Part of that concern is that examination syllabuses "force teachers to compromise their ideals and in particular to adopt a transmission mode of teaching rather than more pupil-centred work." (Whitty 1980). A number of research studies also indicate that some examination bodies through their syllabuses and practices tend to compound the problems associated with the Diploma Disease in developing countries. For example Little's (1982) content analysis of public examinations in eigh African countries revealed that:

1. there was a high degree of emphasis on the achievement of cognitive skills;
2. most examination items measured achievement at a low taxonomic level of knowledge (recall and recognition of factual knowledge; and
3. there was very little concrete real-life reference to be found in the examinations.

Similarly Kai-ming Cheng (2002), observed that most examinations still tend to measure the candidates' amount of information. Few examinations deal with students' process of learning or capacity in learning. Most examinations test in separate, "subjects" and relatively few deal with students' capacity in using knowledge to solve live problems; and in general examinations tend to distort the objectives of education. It is clear that assessment as is practiced today in most countries, including Nigeria can only reinforce rather than combat the Diploma Disease. Combating the Diploma Disease requires a paradigm shift on the part of teachers and Examination bodies from Assessment **of** Learning (which is currently the dominant paradigm), to Assessment **for** Learning (Broadfoot 2002). In the new paradigm, assessment must be geared towards the improvement of teaching and learning and is seen as an effective tool to improve the quality of Education (Capper 1994).

What does this paradigmatic shift entail and what are its essential features? The principles of such a shift are well argued in Shepard (2000) based on a cognitive and constructivist theories of learning. She contends that:

> Classroom assessment involves challenging tasks to elicit higher order thinking; addresses learning processes as well as learning outcomes; is an ongoing process and integrated with instruction; is used formatively in support of student learning; makes expectations visible to students – students are active in evaluating their work and is used to evaluate teaching as well student learning. (Gippes & Stobert 2002).

The principles of this new paradigm were developed by the Assessment Reform Group as a reaction to the "dominance of testing and accountability forms of assessment" and further elaboration of the new paradigm can be found in Carless (2002) and at the Website of the Assessment Reform Group www.assessment-reform-group.or.uk.

It should however be noted that the new paradigm is not context-free and it is doubtful if it can be imported wholesale into Nigeria or indeed other developing countries. There is the need to take into account the goals, structure and practices and realities of Nigerian education

or any country that seeks to reform its assessment system in line with the above recommendations, if indeed the Diploma Disease is to be combated. The point of departure is for examination bodies to re-examine their philosophies and practices with a view to facilitating the transformation of the tasks of schooling in Nigeria from '**educating to get a job**' to '**educating to do a job**' – i.e. effectively combating the Diploma Disease.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the Diploma in Nigeria and how it is subverting education by turning schools into mere certificate-issuing factories. The manifestations of the Diploma Disease were highlighted. It was pointed out that as one of the strategies of combating the Diploma Disease, there needs to be a paradigm shift in assessment; and examination bodies need to re-examine their philosophies and practices based on the new paradigm so as to assist in combating it. It should however be noted that reforming existing assessment procedures and systems is not sufficient, wide ranging reforms in the education system and the wider political economy must also be undertaken.

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