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UNITY SCHOOLS AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN NIGERIA: ISSUES CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

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ABSTRACT

This paper looked at the Federal Government colleges, otherwise referred to as unity schools as agents of national unity and integration in Nigeria. The paper highlighted the fact that Nigeria is a poly-ethnic society of over 250 ethnic nationals, diverse in cultural practices, languages, cuisines, religion, and belief systems. The multi-ethnic nature of the Nigerian state as created by the British Colonial master has been a crises-ridden nation right from inception even witnessing a civil war. The Federal government of Nigeria introduced the unity schools as an avenue to encourage national unity and integration in Nigeria after the thirty months of civil war. The paper observed that the unity schools though with lofty objectives are faced with a lot of challenges that limited the objectives of the schools being actualized to the letter. The challenges range from the elitist nature of the school that limited the admission process to a privileged few, to corruption, poor funding poor supervision, and indiscipline among others. Based on these challenges so observed, the authors recommended a proper reorganization of the unity schools to meet the contemporary demands and challenges of the time, if national unity is hoped to be achieved through the unity schools.



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Introduction

Nigeria as a nation is the creation of the British Colonial Government in the 1914. Nigeria is made up over 250 ethnic nationals with diverse culture, language, cuisines, belief system and religion. Living together as one indivisible entity since its creation has been a major challenge right from the period of the amalgamation in 1914 till date. The challenges of ethnic rivalry, religious crises and intolerance; political wrangling and military coups has impeded the development and stability of the nation since she gained her independence in 1960. Right from the period of her independence in 1960 till the period of the first military coup on the 15th of January, dissensions, suspicion, ethnic crises and political hungry has been the order of the day that finally gravitated to a thirty month civil war. After the civil war, the need to galvanize the ethnic groups into a belief and feeling of oneness was dimmed imperative. The then Military government of General Yakubu Gowon considered many options and policy that will encourage national unity and integration. One of such policies was introducing and creating the Federal Government colleges in all the states of the Federation after the civil war. These Federal Government colleges are referred to as unity schools, because of the intention of the government to use them as agents/avenue of national unity and integration in Nigeria.

The Unity Schools

The establishment of the unity schools otherwise referred to as the Federal Government Colleges was an educational venture by the federal government of Nigeria, aimed at integrating the culturally diverse Nigerian body polity through education.(FRN2004:8) The unity schools were established in the then twelve states of the federation immediately after the Nigerian civil war. Students from different parts of the country were exposed to a common entrance examination that qualified them to be admitted into the unity schools. The idea was that these young Nigerians in living, studying and eating together for a period of five to seven years as the case may be will develop kinship ties that last even after their school years.

Adesina (1988), posits that the unity schools was an experiment by the General Yakubu Gowon's Military regime in 1973, aimed at national unity and national integration. He maintains that the idea was that youthful young people drawn from all parts of the nation would grow up together, interface and create strong base for themselves in the plan of national social and social qualities. Many inter-cultural marriages and friendship have also taken place amongst Nigerians from different cultural groups as a result of the unity schools which ordinarily would not have taken place. This indeed has also encouraged national integration in Nigeria. Orubite (2022), also maintains that the essence of admitting students into the unity schools in such a way that each of them become a mini-Nigeria was one; to satisfy the federal character principle entrenched in the Nigerian Constitution for every Federal Government establishment. Another reason for the establishment of the Federal Government colleges according to Orubite, was to develop long lasting/enduring relationships amongst adolescents from different parts of the country who will grow up together in the same classroom/school. The adolescents growing together will understand themselves, their ethnic similarities and differences, thereby fostering national consciousness, unity, and integration

However, the unity schools have been criticized in much respect. Some of the criticisms levelled against the unity schools according to Adesina (1988), is that admissions were offered to only the children of the few privileged class and in this regard are considered to be highly elitist institutions. Unity schools are also considered to be very expensive to maintain. Ukeje (1992), maintained that due to the expensiveness, the unity schools can only accommodate a negligible fraction of the total secondary school enrolment population thereby falling short of the unity it desires

to achieve through bringing children from different ethnic groups together. Despite these anomalies, the unity schools continue to be part of the symbol of unity through an education policy.

SOME CHALLENGES OF THE UNITY SCHOOL

The Unity school, though a lofty venture by the Federal Government of General Yakubu Gowon aimed at encouraging national unity and integration in Nigeria immediately after the Nigerian civil war; in the early seventies, the programme was faced with a lot of challenges that hampered the actualization of the programme. The challenges facing the unity schools are listed below.

Very Elitist Institution: One of the criticisms of the unity school is that it is a very elitist institution. The number of the schools in the whole federation is too small compared with the teeming population of the Nigerian youths who need secondary education. Given the fact that the aim of the school is to bring together Nigerian youths from diverse parts of the country to be educated, interact and mingle as to develop affinity, thereby encouraging unity in diversity. The unity school can only offer admission to a cream of students, mainly the children of the privileged few/ class

Very Expensive Model to Operate: The second challenge to the unity school is that it is a very expensive model to operate. The standards set by the Federal government for the operation of the unity school is very demanding and unattainable by state governments Adesina (1988), maintains that the expensiveness of the school standard makes it difficult for any state government to be willing to take over the management of the schools when called upon to do so. Ukeje (1992), affirms that the unity schools are very expensive to maintain and their total student enrolment is almost a negligible fraction of the total secondary school population in the country. The complicated and expensive nature of the institutions and the rigid admission procedure makes the objective of the unity school a mirage. The rigid admission procedure limits the number of persons and creates a specific class of students with a level of intelligence; thereby making the unity school, a school for the very bright class of students. With this method of admission the children from the rural community who are not so exposed are sidelined in the admission process, where then is the unity in diversity the unity schools intend to achieve?

Quota System of Admission: The quota system of admission into the Federal Government College is in keeping with policy of Federal Character in the Nigerian Constitution. The Federal Character principle provides for the equal representation of all the states of the federation in any Government parastatal to encourage unity in diversity. This quota system of admission has denied very bright students the opportunity of being admitted into the unity school, to create room for admission for another student who is not so bright but admitted just to fill the space for his own state. This quota system of admission has seriously created dissension among students and disunity it intends to create in what students see as discrimination instead of national Character representation. Okoli, UgwumbaIwejuo and Kalu (2015), also maintain that merit is sacrificed on the altar of federal character and ethnic balancing. In most cases the quota system has been reduced to “who knows who and who has what”?

Poor Funding: Another major challenge facing the unity school is poor funding. Government funding to the school is so poor compared with the humongous nature of the school facilities, infrastructure and student ratio. The poor funding makes it difficult to translate the lofty objectives of the government for the school into reality. This creates a yawning gap between the government dream for the unity schools and the actual day to day running of the school. This lack of proper funding makes the unity school just a white elephant project by policy. Many of the infrastructures in the school lack

maintenance. Some of the schools do not have qualified or expatriate teachers to manage and service them, especially some science laboratory equipments.

Corruption: Corruption is another challenge facing the Federal government colleges –the unity school. The corrupt practices of government personnel that directly oversee the activities of the unity schools is a major set-back to the schools. Orubite (2022) maintains that some unscrupulous principals and their lieutenants connive with the ministry officials to defraud the unity schools of the financial allocations meant for the maintenance of the schools. He argues that more often than not, money meant for the execution of serious projects ‘suffer weight lose’ at every table to the extent that before the money gets to the destination for the projects , it has vanished into the thin air or is no longer enough for the execution of the projects it was intended for.

Lack of adequate infrastructure: The corrupt practices of the ministry officials who directly oversee the activities of the unity schools, in collaboration with some greedy principals has seriously affected the provision and maintenance of infrastructure in the unity schools. Many schools school lack the infrastructure that is needed for the smooth running of the school. This has led to situations where parents are asked to improvise for the schools or tasked some levy in the name of providing for the needed infrastructure, which in most cases are not procured. This has created a lot of surprises in the mind of many Nigerians who see the unity schools as a model of excellent secondary education institution and at the same time making mockery of the government intentions and dream about unity through the schools.

Indiscipline: Indiscipline is another challenge facing the Federal Government unity schools. Due to the elitist nature of the school, many children of top Nigerian military officials and ministry officials conscious of their parents statuses, lack the humility to be disciplined and as a result, corrupt and pollute the behaviour of students from disciplined families. Many students engage in cultist activities and some un towards behaviour that is inimical to the running of the school to achieve the desired objective of establishing the schools. Given the family background of this group of students, the school authority finds it difficult to enforce discipline on erring students who in most cases invite their parents to the school. Many teachers have suffered humiliation in the hand of some parents whose wards were disciplined by the school authority.

Lack of regular supervision: Lack of regular supervision is another problem facing the unity school from actualizing the very objective for which it was set up .The Federal ministry of education and relevant agencies overseeing the activities of Federal Government institutions of learning do not have adequate time for the supervision of the unity schools to ensure that the activities and running of the school is in tandem with the provisions of the decree establishing the schools. This has created double standards in the school. A situation where different practices, rules and levies are imposed by some principals without any recourse to the rules and laws guiding the operation of the unity school. Abraham and Uche (2011), maintain that supervision is imperative in any institution or organisation to enable principal actors of such institutions perform their duties in line with the set objectives of the institution. FME.(2007), Orubite (2022) maintain that the absence of quality and regular mentoring and supervision has hindered the unity schools from achieving their set objectives. It is observed that obsolete method of evaluation are still in vogue in many of the schools, this cannot make the school a truly centre of excellence as envisaged by the Federal government

Inappropriate deployment of teachers: Another challenge to the unity school is the problem of posting teachers for some special subject areas. Some special subjects like French and computer based subjects do not have qualified teachers to cover for all the arms of the colleges. In some cases teachers

reject postings to some remote areas that is very far from their states of origin and their families. The same is the case with some students whose parents reject the admission offer for their wards on the ground that the schools are located in areas tagged as religious volatile areas in the country. This attitude of parents has seriously affected the intention of the Federal government in establishing the schools as centres of unity in accommodating students from all the states of the Federation. A situation where some parents reject the admission offer to their wards due to distance from their states of origin negates the philosophy behind the establishment of the unity school in bringing Nigerian youths from different states of the federation to be represented in a place to learn and grow together, thus developing national consciousness and feeling of oneness.

THE WAY FORWARD

The unity schools otherwise referred to as the Federal government colleges were established in the seventies immediately after the Nigerian Civil war as centres of unity to encourage national integration in Nigeria. The schools were also established as models of centre of excellence to produce qualified manpower to encourage national development and national unity. However, over the years the school has become a shadow of itself as a result of some of the challenges enumerated above. Given the condition and the challenges facing the unity schools, it has become imperative to critically think with the way forward to manage the unity schools for the best result and if possible to restore its past glories. To solve some of these problems, The unity should be generally reorganised from the method of admission to the general administration of the schools. On the issue of quota admission system, where merit has been sacrificed on the altar of national character, the admission process should accommodate all the students who passed on merit from any state of the federation, this will encourage parents and students to prepare to meet up with the standard of admission. There should be regular supervision and monitoring of the unity schools by the federal ministry of education unit responsible for secondary education. Oko-Jaja (2011), maintains that supervision will enable the ministry of education to detect the changes and lags in the school system and make provisions to improve them. On issue of infrastructural decay and lack of maintenance, the Federal government should earmark special budget for the unity schools with special agencies to supervise, control and monitor the disbursement of fund to the schools and oversee the maintenances of the infrastructures in the schools. The posting of teachers to states and remote places far from their homes; especially teacher in special subject area should attract special financial inducement to encourage the acceptance of postings to such areas. The admission of students to the school should be limited to the quantity of infrastructure and equipments to meet every student's need. To maintain discipline in the schools the Federal government should set up a standing committee made up senior government officials with standing rules. In a situation where a student is disciplined or expelled, the parents of such student can appeal to the committee to seek for redress.

Conclusion.

We have discussed the unity schools highlighting the challenges and some recommendations on the way forward. However, it is imperative to observe that every educational policy is more often than not a response to the societal and educational challenges of the time. Given the fact the Unity school was a child and product of necessity after the Nigerian civil war to encourage national unity and integration in Nigeria; national unity through the unity schools has remained elusive in Nigeria. The contemporary political and economic realities of the Nigerian state calls for an evaluation and a reconsideration of the need for the unity schools. Though unity schools as it were had encouraged the bringing of Nigerian youths together, but the impact is so negligible due to the fewness of the number of students that are admitted into the schools compared with the population of school age children that seeks admission into the school. This calls for a timely remodelling of the schools to meet the contemporary Nigerian educational need, and that time is now.

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