THE EDUCATIONAL IMPERATIVES OF NATIONAL UNITY AND NATION BUILDING

DIENYE Victory Uchechukwu¹ and ATITI, Thomas¹

¹Department of Educational foundations
University of Port Harcourt

ABSTRACT

Although great importance is attached to the role of education in national unity and nation building in Nigeria, the role of education has been tentative. Education is central to societal growth and the vehicle through which many nations have been built. Given the crucial need for education in development, this paper highlights the need for adequate development and revitalization of education within the context of national unity and the preservation of multi-ethnic identity. It also evaluates the various efforts made by the government to foster nation building through educational and youth development programmes.

Keywords: Education, Development, Colonialism, Nationalism

INTRODUCTION

According to Iwilade (2010) “Nigeria is an abstraction, a non-existent phenomenon whose continued pretence to a practical organic life is a travesty of the science of anthropology. Without urgent and conscious effort, this lie is bound to unravel and create the greatest development tragedy of the twenty first century. Fused together by the British in 1914 from the carcass of an Africa that had been mercilessly partitioned at the Berlin conference of 1884 after years of rapacious exploitation, and granted independence fifty six years later, the Nigerian nation still remains to be born”.

Nigeria is a nation of over two hundred and fifty ethnic groups who were merged to form one nation by the British Government. These ethnic groups were independent of themselves before the British occupation started between the period of 1820-1861 on a small scale through missionary activities and trade of the Royal Niger Company. The amalgamation of these administrative units brought about unhealthy rivalry among the various administrators who struggled for the interest group which they represented.

The ethnic groups had various forms of inter-ethnic relations among themselves through trade, diplomatic ties, management of trade routes and in some cases ethnic conflicts which has led to the loss of lives and properties. The ceding of the geographical area known today as
Nigeria to Britain at the Berlin conference on Africa held in Berlin in 1855 hastened the desire to achieve a total and effective control over Nigeria and this constituted the prime objectives of the British Colonial Government between 1890-1914. To achieve this, the British colonial administration used violent means, that is, the military against ethnic groups or traditional rulers who refused to accept British rule. According to Falola (1991) the manner in which the amalgamation was implemented and the new boundary adjustment which accompanied the new provinces that were created left a legacy of tension between the various ethnic groups thereby creating some adverse impact on the subsequent relationship among the ethnic groups.

The amalgamation also resulted in a situation in which Independent ethnic groups were being classified as ethnic minority or majority ethnic groups which brought about the Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba becoming the major ethnic groups in the country, while the others constituted the minority ethnic groups. This has led to the minority ethnic groups over the years being singled out on equal treatment by the majority ethnic groups in the country in all areas of human endeavors. This was why Saro-Wiwa (the Guardian November 8, 1988:9) described Nigeria as:

“A slave society, a rogue state with a very strong central Government in which the ethnic majority oppressed the minorities, depriving them of political power and of their economic resources”.

These ethnic groups did not apparently set up a process to constitute these ethnic nationalities into one country causing Awolowo (1947) to challenge that “Nigeria is not a nation, but a mere geographical expression”. Also, Balewa (1945) cited in Agbese (2008:69) stated that:

“Many Nigerians deceive themselves by thinking that Nigeria is one… particularly some of the press people … This is wrong, am sorry to say that the presence of unity is artificial and it ends outside this chamber. The southern tribes who are now pouring into the north in ever increasing numbers and more or less domiciled here do not meet with northern people … and we in the north look upon them as invaders. Since 1914, the British Government has tried to make Nigeria into one country, but Nigerians themselves are historically different in their backgrounds, in their religious beliefs and customs and do not show themselves any sign of willingness to unite …. Nigerian unity is only a British invention in the country”.

The problems of building a united and strong nation have been caused by the activities of some political leaders who see themselves first as representatives of their ethnic group in power to develop their areas first before other parts of the country. Shedrack (2009) concluded that the resurgence and proliferation of ethnic and religious organization with a pronounced political agenda which pursue their various demands with well armed militias are all pointers to the fact that the unity of this country is at stake.

Since after the Nigeria civil war, there have been spirited efforts on the part of the Federal Government to use education to promote national unity. It has introduced various programmes such as the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC); the establishment of unity secondary schools in all states of the federation; and the introduction of quota system for national employment and educational placements (Koseman and Okorosaye-orubite, 2002:127).

The efforts of government to unite the various ethnic groups have not been successful because of leadership problem, which is conspicuously manifested in the areas of employment, admission into educational institutions, the distribution of social amenities, establishment of
industries, appointments into leadership positions and in social relationships. These factors have heightened the competition among the various ethnic groups to produce state governors and president of the country during elections at both levels of government.

METHOD AND MATERIALS

The study relied solely on secondary materials.

DISCUSSIONS

Allport (1954) cited in Stark (2005:293) explains that when members of different racial and ethnic groups with equal status come together to co-operate and pursue common goals, they learn to appreciate their common experiences and background which help to decrease their prejudice.

Educational institutions provide opportunities for students from different racial and ethnic groups with equal status to interact. When students have contact primarily with teachers and students of their own racial and ethnic groups, such contacts reinforces prejudices, stereotypes and myths which cause racial and ethnic discrimination. This is why government and educators should adopt multicultural education strategies in our educational institutions to forge national unity as it is applicable in most developed nations of the world.

Education has been used as a veritable instrument for national integration and development of most nations of the world (Ukeje 1988:33) and Mooney et al (2005:195). Education has been defined in several ways. Education is “the continuous all round socialization of the individual’s attitude, habits, values, beliefs, skills, social understanding and the practice of living in a society” (Okoh, 2004:36). The federal government has published five main philosophical goals in the National Policy on Education (2004:6) namely: a free and democratic society; a just and egalitarian society; a united, strong and self-reliant nation; a great and dynamic economy; and, a land full of bright opportunities for all citizens. Despite the stated educational objectives, it is contentious as to whether the goals are achievable.

Education has been the most documented strategy for improving racial and ethnic relations. It involves the creation of opportunities for positive equal status, interactions among different racial and ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic status, religion, genders, sexual orientation, academic and physical ability and geography Mooney et al (2005) and Johnson et al (2005) have noted that an educational institution environment provides great experiences for students from diverse ethnic groups. It enables them to confirm some prejudices, learnt from parents which cause disunity among people of diverse racial and ethnic groups which are in most cases dispelled through the process of interaction, teaching and learning. It gives the students the opportunity to ask new questions and to see new realities about irresponsible behaviour and actions of a few individuals from different racial and ethnic group.

A functional educational system exposes students to the root causes of racial and ethnic discrimination, prejudices and stereotypes which enable individuals to examine their own attitude more objectively. This will in turn help them to deal wisely with them when they are victims of such actions. These educational strategies and programme that have been used by various countries of the world to forge national unity should be replicated in our educational institutions, committees and in workplaces.

Research evidence suggests that multicultural education has increased racial and ethnic understanding, cultural awareness, and increased social interaction among students from
different ethnic backgrounds. According to Johnson et al (2005:44) multicultural education refers to: “an educational strategy in the school curriculum content that incorporates the teaching of students from diverse background human relations, study of ethnic and cultural groups, development of critical thinking skills and the examination of issues as racism, power and discrimination.”

Multicultural education involves teaching and learning that are culturally relevant, classrooms and schools that are models of democracy and equity. For multicultural education to become a reality in schools; there is an urgent need for the introduction of multicultural education in our public and private secondary schools in the country. Apart from the command secondary schools and federal Government colleges where some semblance of multicultural education is being practised to some extent, education in our schools does not reflect the multicultural perspective in their teaching and learning process. Sleeters and Grant (2002) cited in Gollnick and Chinn (2006:7) stated that the total school environment must show commitment to good quality of learning.

Educators must apply these new methods and techniques in Nigerian schools and have the courage to challenge government for the ineffective educational policies and school curriculum and to ensure that each subject area is taught from a multicultural perspective that will bring about equity and national unity.

Educational institutions have a major role in the reduction of prejudices and ethnic discrimination; teachers must acknowledge that ethnic discrimination is a major problem in Nigeria today. Once this is acknowledged, there is an ample body of research which educators can draw from to reduce prejudices and discrimination that have affected our social relationship in the country.

There is the need to adequately train and re-train teachers in multicultural education. The most important element in establishing a positive learning environment, are the outlooks and attitudes of teachers in schools. Teachers who are exposed to the multicultural education programme are less prejudiced than those who are not.

Many teachers in Nigerian school did not take any course on race and ethnic relations while in school. They grew up in mono-cultural societies and proceed to teach in their own communities without interacting with people from other ethnic groups. Teachers need adequate training and retraining if they are to function effectively as teachers in a multicultural society.

According to Morrison (1997:5-8) and Banks (2001:53) teachers who employ the following strategies help to reduce discrimination and prejudices in their classrooms and in the larger society with the following:

- Raise the self esteem of all students in their classes
- Avoid segregating students by race and ethnic group.
- Make use of books that are free of bias that present positive portrayal of oppressed ethnic groups in the country.
- Teacher’s make use of cooperative learning methods in the class to create thoughtful equitable interaction to promote positive relationships among students of diverse ethnic groups.
- Engage students in extra and curricular activities which help them develop knowledge and skills and attitude to foster positive inter – ethnic relationship.
- Have rules and regulations that prohibit ethnic discrimination.
- Promote critical thinking skills, since these are the anti-thesis of prejudiced thinking.
- Use the role - reversal method or other technologies where students are asked to examine information from the perspectives of others.
Planning the curriculum from a multicultural perspective reduces prejudice. Teachers promote a learning environment where students are not only responsible for their own learning but seek to help their fellow students, more positive human relations occurs.

The school curriculum in Nigeria almost entirely reflects the culture of the major ethnic groups at the expense of the minority ethnic groups. Many teachers are faced with limited understanding of any culture other than their own and the possibility of learning skills and attitudes that would enable them to relate positively with students from different cultural backgrounds. Teaching is much more than content mastering and lesson planning, effective teaching also requires the teachers' understanding of the cultural context in which learning takes place. This is why the training and retraining of teachers, is very important. This ensures they impart skills and knowledge that fosters national unity on students. Morrison (1997: 138) pointed out that for education to help foster national unity, the teacher must be multicultural aware teachers, therefore, they must take time to learn about students' background and cultural characteristics of their families and community; respect and accommodate students individual and culture based learning styles; provide accurate and age–related multicultural information and instructional materials; challenge and avoid using stereotypes in class; use culture fair and gender -fair language and examples; and, integrate multicultural perspectives throughout the curriculum to foster harmonious relationship among students.

He further added that teachers should ensure that all students have safe, positive environment and school policies that reduce prejudices and discrimination. Instructional practices should be monitored to ensure that they promote self – esteem. Students’ multicultural needs are best met through gender- fair and cultural-fair education.

Admission policies based on the diversity of the student population from various racial and ethnic group in a country help students instill patriotic values and foster national unity. It has been observed that when students from diverse background come together to learn, interact and share experience about them, they foster positive relationships among themselves. Gurin in Mooney et al (2005:195) stated that research has found out that students that are exposed to a diverse population during college, had the most cross – racial and ethnic interaction five years after leaving school.

Immediately after the Nigeria civil war, the Federal Government of Nigeria established unity secondary schools in all the states of the federation to bring children of diverse ethnic backgrounds in Nigeria to live and learn together and prepare the students for useful living within the society (Ukeje 1988:33). Some state government in the country also introduced inter- state students’ exchange programmes to foster national unity. These programmes were stopped because most state governors stopped financing boarding schools in their respective states. State governments should build unity schools in their respective states to complement the 104 federal government colleges in the country. The present monoculture nature of most of our schools in the country will not foster national unity.

Affirmative action refers to a broad range of policy and practices that are put in place in educational institutions to promote equal opportunity as well as diversity in education. It represents an attempt to Compensate for the effects of previous discrimination. According to Sadlack (1976:74) and Gollnick and Chinn (2006:7), educators should employ these affirmative strategies to inculcate the virtue of national consciousness in students. Students should be encouraged to respect each other, trusting each other, cooperate with each other and promote peaceful co-existence through group assignments.

Governments at all levels should implement the compulsory Universal Basic Education Act (2004) cited in Oskoya (2008:180) which stated that, any parent or guardian
who fails to send his / her child or ward to school commits an offence and is liable for conviction to deter parents from not sending their children to school. Education remains the first step towards guaranteeing equality of opportunity. Through improved self–esteem, better understanding of differences and greater visibility for individuals from under-represented ethnic groups.

Access to basic education has continued to elude millions of children, adults and out-of-school youths despite government efforts. Kosemani and Okorosaye-Orubite (2002) have observed that the programmes put in place by the government have not been able to eradicate the educational inequality which has continued to persist. While stable progress has been made in student’s enrolment, much progress is still needed to address the disparity, Nigerian Educational Data Survey (2010). The federal and state governments, especially state governors of the northern states should intensify efforts at reducing the educational disparity between the Northern and Southern parts of the country through the encouragement of their children to attend school.

The distressing findings of the Nigeria Educational Data Survey presented by the National Population Commission (2011) revealed that children between 6–16 years who have never attended school is highest in the North – East and North West which does not augur well for the unity of this country. States like Borno 72 percent, Yobe 58 percent, Bauchi 52 percent, Zamfara 68 percent, Sokoto 66 percent and Kebbi 60 percent, Abia one percent, Oyo eight percent, and Lagos two percent of children which have never attended school Ahonsi (2011: 2).

Education is a great equalizer which can enhance employment of the poor and disadvantaged and increase the chance for a better human relationship in any society in which he finds himself. This can be made possible by the government's introduction of poverty alleviation programmes for parents so that they can fund the education of their children. Poverty remains the greatest barrier to education in most parts of the country. Government should look into the compensatory educational programmes that it has put in place and come out with a well planned and funded programme so that it can meet the needs and objectives for which they were set up.

Government should address the gender disparity in education; girls do have limited access to education due to cultural factors, sexual violence, insecure school environment and inadequate sanitation that adversely affect their self esteem, participation and retention in education. Efforts should be made to build educational institutions in riverine areas of Nigeria. The National Open University should open study centre in all states of the federation to provide access to higher education for all Nigerian students who could not have access to regular conventional university education due to some reasons.

The school authorities should ensure that all students participate in extra and co-curricular activities after school hours. School programs such as sporting activities, drama clubs, Christian student fellowship, young farmers clubs etc. These schools sponsored activities helps students to develop knowledge and skills and attitudes that increase academic achievements and foster positive inter-ethnic relationship among students.

According to (Loeb 1994) cited in Kendall (2006: 341) these clubs would help students and teachers to identify factors that have contributed to racial and ethnic discrimination in society such as the divisiveness between different cultural and ethnic minorities; and the persistent lack of trust. These activities help to raise the consciousness of students to become more self reliant and encourage inclusion and acceptance of all ethnic groups which in the process will forge racial and ethnic harmony among people of different cultural backgrounds.
Students in these clubs are taught peer mediation and conflict resolution methods, which will enable them to live in harmony with other people when they leave school. Diversity training in the workplace involves training programmes put in place by employers of labour to reduce prejudices and discrimination in the workplace. Wheeler (1994) in Mooney (2005:197) stated that diversity training involves “raising personnel awareness about individual differences in the workplace and how those differences inhibit or enhanced the way people work together and get work done”. Workers are educated on issues such as stereotyping and cross-cultural insensitivity and cultural norms of other racial and ethnic group. These norms affect work behaviour and social interaction which affects productivity and profit of various establishments in the United State of America. Diversity training can be effectively used in various workplaces in Nigeria to forge a harmonious relationship which will help bring about national unity.

Societies need active and responsible citizens that can take responsibility for themselves, the community and also contribute to the development of the political process that would bring about national unity. As a result of this, it has become imperative globally for nations to accord citizenship education a core status of the teaching and learning process. Adesina (1985) defined citizenship education is an aspect of education which emphasizes man’s interaction with his social environment that is guided by the vision of a society striving to be peaceful, democratic, just and humane that would lead to positive personal growth of students at school and success after leaving school. It also involves the preparation of students for leadership opportunities as they arise in their lives. Its aim is to specifically inculcate national consciousness, patriotism and the right type of attitudes to forge national Integration and cohesion in the students. The Nigerian Educational Research and Development council (1991) identified the objectives of citizenship education as follows.

- To create an awareness of the provisions of the Nigeria constitution and the need for democracy in Nigeria.
- To create adequate and functional literacy among Nigerians.
- To sensitize Nigerians to the functions and obligations of the Government.
- To make Nigerians fully aware of their rights duties and to respect the rights of others.
- To assist in the production of responsible, well informed and self-reliant citizens.
- To inculcate the right values and attitudes for the development of the individual and Nigeria society.

The aforementioned objectives can materialize only when the citizens of the nation are educated to have an understanding of the political, legal, economic and moral awareness to function in society. It is not enough to have it as a subject via social studies at the pre-primary, primary and junior secondary basic education levels. There is the need for much to be done, because after years of students being exposed to citizenship education in Nigeria, there are various unethical practices even among educated individuals in society.

The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme was established by the federal government of Nigeria in 1973 to engender national unity among Nigerian youths fresh from the nations higher institution of learning after the Nigerian Civil War. The scheme was also aimed at healing the wounds of the thirty months of civil war. Youth Corps members are routinely deployed to other parts of the country from their state of origin to expose them to the culture of other tribes. The scheme is aimed at assisting future policy maker of the country to adapt to the diversities of culture in the nation however, the spate of violence in the Muslim states causing injuries and loss of lives of the serving youth corpsers have dented the overall aim of the programme. It is therefore doubtful as to whether any educational related scheme can foster national unity and national building.
CONCLUSION

In order for Nigeria to harmoniously unite the government should place more emphasis on issues that unite us, as against those that set each ethnic group apart from each other. If education is considered as a tool for effecting national unity, there is the need for effective implementation of the national policy on education. At this stage of Nigeria’s development, government policies should be more inclusive. This inclusiveness should be propagated through school intervention in improving ethnic and racial relations in schools which should be encouraged by government and educators.

Teachers must adopt educational approaches that teach group similarities and differences, draw attentions to the processes of discrimination and emphasizing the commonalities of all groups and the use of cooperative learning techniques. These inclusiveness should be propagated through multicultural education, widening of access to education, diversification of the student population in educational institutions, affirmative action, leadership and citizenship training and effective use of the mass media to educate the public on the need for harmonious relationship and religious tolerance among our Muslim brothers in the Northern Nigeria. Government should also direct its efforts towards solving the problems involving social distractions, behavioural problems, scholastically under-achievements, attitude to school and cultural deprivation of education. Nigeria is considered as one of the most corrupt nations in the world, whether this is true or not, Nigeria is stagnating because of corruption. She needs to build trust among her citizens and fight corruption in all its ramifications, adequately fund education and implement the national policy on education effectively in order to unite the country.

REFERENCES


Iwilade, Akin (2010) Nation Building, wordpress.com


NERDS Press Lagos.


Saro-Wiwa, k ( The Guardian November, 8th 1988).


