



Public Sector Reform:

Bringing Quality to Schools in Kwara State¹

²Reform is a normative term that operates on an ideal vision of society. Education reform would therefore mean 'change' or 'improvement' in education. Behind this simple definition however is a great deal of complexity about what people really mean by education reform; what they do? How they do them and even why?

A cursory review of recent literature reveals striking similarities among issues that dominate education reform debates across the world: Quality of teachers and teacher training; longer school day or school year; content of curriculum and textbooks;

¹ Bolaji Abdullahi, Commissioner for Education, Science and Technology, Kwara State, delivered this paper at the Mustapha Akanbi Foundation Ilorin, January 2011

² This paper is not to be cited.

neglected infrastructure; monitoring and inspection; adequacy of educational supplies; funding and funding strategies; salaries and allowances of teachers; standardisation; enrolments and retention; testing and examinations; admission policy; equity and access; computers and ICT; language of instructions or 'mother tongue', etc.

While the overall goal of almost all these reform issues is to improve education standards in one way or the other, they have different implications for policy making and implementations. Looking at the Latin American countries, Merilee Grindle (2004) illustrates this point clearly with her classifications of education reform³. In comparing what she called '*access*' and '*quality*' reform, she noted that the two elicits different kinds of expectations and imposes different kinds of demands on reform stakeholders. While '*access*' reforms tend to be much easier to implement; '*quality*' reforms are much more complex because of the new dynamics they tend to introduce into the political economy space.

'*Access*' reform generally does not harm anyone. In fact, it tends to bring immediate benefits which further strengthen political elites and bureaucrats by expanding patronage opportunities through contracts and employments. '*Quality reform*' however, because of its focus on improved efficiency and accountability often challenges the statusquo and demands new ways of thinking and behaving from the various actors and stakeholders. It could also lead to loss of privileges and positions or even jobs.

The assertion that reform is technically simple, but politically complex has '*quality*' reform in mind. If politics is the authoritative allocation of values, then this kind of reform is politics by other means. In fact, it is interesting to note how '*education*' often gets easily sidelined and politics, especially politics of '*loss*' assumes the centre-stage of the reform conversation. As it is said, people are not so much interested in the gains that change will bring as they are afraid of the loss it would generate.

Political participation in much of Africa is mostly based on rational considerations rather than ideological conviction⁴. The decision to participate in politics, whether by voting or mobilising people to vote, or even by organising to influence government policies is usually driven by the economic imperative; the desire to gain, promote and

³ Grindle M (2004) *Despite the Odds: The Contentious Politics of Education Reform*. Princeton and Oxford Princeton University Press.

⁴ See Huntington, S., and Nelson, P., (1976). No Easy Choice; Political Participation in Developing Countries, Cambridge, Harvard University Press as well as Kasfir, N. (1992).

'Popular Sovereignty and Popular Participation; Mixed Constitutional Democracy in the Third World', Third World Quarterly, Vol. 13, No 4.

dispense 'benefits' and patronage. In fact, political elites normally measure their relevance and sustain their constituency authorisation with their ability to dispense patronage. By blocking the opportunities for patronage and demanding accountability, 'quality' reform undermines the very platform on which political elites build their relevance. Political survival therefore becomes an imperative to mobilise against change.

Neither political nor bureaucratic elite, or even unions and other politically important groups would find it difficult to understand the need for change, especially when such change is advocated as the solution to an obvious crisis situation. However, the content of 'change' and the process of implementation would always be contentious if it could alter the statusquo that has been maintained for the creation and allocation of private values. To the beneficiaries of the statusquo, supporting change would be a literal act of suicide. In this context, therefore reform is a political and not a technical process or action.

Background to Reform

Education in Kwara State is built around the ministry of education, Science and Technology; the State Universal Education Board (SUBEB); the Teaching Service Commission; the Polytechnic, the three Colleges of Education, and the College of Arabic and Islamic Legal Studies (CAILS). I will briefly examine some of these 'supply institutions', starting with the ministry itself.

The ministry of education, science and technology has overall managerial and oversight responsibilities for the education sector at all levels in the State. However, due to a combination of abysmal lack of competence, wanton corruption and nepotism, the ministry had lost its capacity to provide leadership. Staff within the ministry had become demoralized and had also surrendered to the lure of petty corruption. Politicking and nepotism became the only assured way of progress in the service; whom you know was more important than what you know. The decay in the larger civil service actually provided a conducive environment for indolence and all manners of official misbehavior. Many of the staff had been on the same post since they joined the service. The few conscientious and hardworking ones had become demoralized and frustrated and were only ghosting through each day.

This was the Ministry that I met. And it was immediately clear to me why the education system was in such a terrible shamble. Like the late M.K.O Abiola remarked, if you want to know whether a fish is good or bad, you have to check the head. Once the head is rotten, then the remaining part of the fish becomes useless. Therefore, what the ordinary people on the streets see as the degeneration of the education sector was merely a reflection of the terminal rot in the ministry itself.

Next is the Universal Basic Education Board. SUBEB, as it is called, has the primary responsibility of implementing the UBE in the State. It also has under its direct supervision, about 25, 000 teaching and non-teaching staff at the primary level. It is also represented in all the 16 Local Governments by an LGEA Secretary, who legally also has the power to discipline, appoint and promote any staff below the GL7.

Theoretically, SUBEB is responsible to the ministry. However, either due to the Ministry's inability to assert its authority or SUBEB leadership's high capacity for insubordination, the two have become almost independent of each other. As a Special Adviser, I once asked a member of the Board what was the relationship between the Board and the Ministry, and he told me that there was practically no relationship. SUBEB only needed to communicate some of their actions and decisions to the ministry if they so desired!

The SUBEB Chairman was effectively a second Commissioner for education; if not the main Commissioner, being that he sits on top of resources in excess of N2billion each year, which allows for extensive patronage opportunities. He was therefore, courted and lobbied and, of course protected by all the politicians running after the 'dividends' of democracy, and this did not always exclude the commissioner himself.

While the SUBEB Chairman was carrying on like the emperor, the LGEA Secretaries became Vassal Lords. Because they are mostly politicians who gained their appointment through their contributions to the party rather than any technical competence, they did not have to worry about discipline or performance. Just like the SUBEB, they also appointed, promoted, sacked and deployed at will and by whims. The only consideration governing their behavior was political correctness. In fact, it would not be wrong to conclude that their interpretation of their role was that as political appointees they were deployed to ensure that teachers and other staff in their respective domains remained loyal to the party. And as long as a teacher or a head teacher was not accused of disloyalty, anything else could be pardoned.

Under this condition, the schools degenerated to virtual collapse both physically and operationally. Teachers practically stopped going to schools. Many of them became full time politicians; they would rather attend political meetings rather than teach. Many became merchants and traders. They opened shops everywhere and went on business trips when they should be in school. Before long, the schools themselves became trading centers, and school children were turned to hawkers by their own teachers. Teachers attended schools in shifts and the head teachers dared not as much as raise an eyebrow. In any case, the few that were attending schools regularly were not teaching because they were Assistant Head teachers. Most schools had up to 6 Assistant Head teachers, some with sole responsibility of catching late comers. And when the 'duty posts' could no longer go round, the schools were divided into two and three and the posts were

multiplied accordingly.

Meanwhile, the hapless children were abandoned to their devices. How many times have I visited schools and did not find one teacher or even the head teacher! In such schools, the primary 4 children took it upon themselves to teach the younger ones in primary 1 or 2, while those in primary 6 taught the ones in primary 4 and 5. I wept at this tragedy, and wondered how a country could do this to its children.

As the schools degenerated, the children of course, learnt nothing. I encountered children completing the 6th year of primary school who could not identify their own names or the alphabets. Majority of the children could not even read a sentence from a book. Many of them thought the headquarters of their local government was Dr. Bukola Saraki. At some point we found ourselves clapping for primary 4 children who could write their names!

While these were going on, private schools became big business; many of them populated by the children of the public school teachers. Desperate parents who could afford it withdrew their children from the public schools and enrolled them in private schools that were springing up everyday like mushrooms, cashing in on the failure of public education. Not minding the quality of education in these private schools, parents were just happy that their children could recite 'State and Capitals' soon after resuming school, and that in their reckoning justifies their investments.

Naturally, secondary education was not better. Students had resorted to cheating their ways through schools and passing examinations through fraud. Examination malpractice was enjoying a historic prosperity. Powerful cartels have sprung up everywhere coordinated by the so-called Exam Officers in schools. These were smart young men mostly appointed by the principals to bring in the money. They had networks right into the heart of the ministry of education and the examining bodies themselves. In fact, the Examination Department became the most lucrative posting in the ministry. You could buy the question papers of the ministry organized examinations on the streets. People were making brisk business out of historic misfortune. Indeed, our State became a hot destination for examination malpractices in the country. As the national examinations approached, the rural schools became several times more populated than the urban schools. 'Miracle Centers' as they are called, afforded children opportunities to earn distinction grades in all subjects, without knowing anything. Teachers and principals and ministry officials were making money and the children were earning their grades, and everyone was happy and making merry like Christmas.

The Reform Actions.

My resumption in office coincided with the time primary 6 children were sitting for the 'placement tests' across the State. I had been part of the decision to make children sit for

the test, which was Kwara's way of side-tracking the Federal Policy that children should automatically advance to JSS 1 from the primary school. My first official assignment was therefore, to monitor this test. It was on that occasion that I saw children who could not recognize their own names not to talk of reading the question papers. After speaking to these children, I wept. When I returned home that night, I could not sleep. My mind was in turmoil as I contemplated the enormity of the task ahead.

The following Wednesday, I rushed a brief to the State Executive Council. The Governor was especially horrified when I finished my briefing on the 'placement test' and what I thought was responsible for the tragic situation. We then outlined a series of actions that needed to be taken.

We proposed that henceforth, any teacher or head teacher found to be absent from school should face instant suspension and further disciplinary actions. All schools that had been split into two or more should be merged unless the population of each school was up to 1000. Assistant Head teachers in each school should not be more than 2. Promotion of teachers should be based on written examinations and interviews. Examination malpractice should be punished by instant dismissal and prosecution. Teachers were to be re-distributed according to needs. Students must write a joint mock examination before they are allowed to sit for the final NECO/WAEC examination in the State. All head teachers and principals who have spent more than 6 years in their current posting should be posted. And some others.

The State Executive Council approved all these actions after rigorous debates. In confirming the approval, the Chairman of Council and the Governor declared that any action taken by me pursuant to all these reforms would have his full backings. He also warned all members of Council not to interfere with any of the reform actions in any way. This open declaration by the Governor was the most important political muscle that we needed to take off, but it also turned out to be the beginning of the jealousies and animosities that were to constitute another major challenge as we proceeded with the reforms.

Subsequently, we started to make a great show of the fact that we derived our authority directly from the Governor. We also continued to mobilize public opinion and sentiments behind the reform initiatives. We targeted the poorest segment of the society who could not afford any form of private education for their children and explained even the most complex reform ideas to them in a way that resonates clearly to them. We spoke to them and spoke for them. They soon became a mass counter-force to the gale of misinformation and propaganda being actively spread by majority of the teachers and other individuals that were not happy with the reform for obvious reasons, and

bureaucrats who are forced to abide by new standards.

This was how the reform became part of the government's policy agenda. What we did was to create a level of disequilibrium sufficient enough to create a sense of crisis. This way, the context was created to make radical changes desirable, even if not palatable. Without a sense of crisis, our approaches would likely be limited to the business-as-usual and whatever changes proposed would only be merely incremental.

Profiting From Crisis

Grindle and Thomas (1991)⁵ observe that policy elites seem to have the capacity to take advantage of opportune moments and build coalitions in support of reform. They contend that reform actions "often have detailed knowledge of power relationships and bureaucratic interactions that could help or hinder efforts at reform." Thus, they are able to generate strategies "to encourage the adoption and pursuit of preferred solutions to major policy and institutional problems" as well as to mobilise support and manage opposition."

Reform of the Local Government Education Authorities (LGEAs) is a major case in this regard. Like I mentioned earlier, even though the Education Secretaries are civil servants, their appointment was political. Therefore, they saw themselves more as representatives of the party than as education officers. Patronage, cronyism, and self interest were therefore paramount considerations in discharging even routine functions. This had presented a major obstacle to every attempt to make education management more efficient and to improve schools.

The State Education Board pays the total salary amount of about 2.5million USD into a single bank account at the end each month and then issue checks to respective Education Secretaries, who in turn withdraw the cash and pay their teachers by hand. Added to their power to hire, fire and transfer some categories of staff, there was no limit to what they could do.

We have launched a broad-based reform, but it was clear that the greatest motivation for resistance was the financial benefits in the old ways. This therefore had to be tackled. In January 2009, we contracted a commercial bank to deliver e-payment solutions in managing the payroll and in paying staff salaries through electronics transfer. We were convinced that this was the best solution to the problem of corruption and other serious challenges that have made the reform efforts in the sector so difficult.

⁵ Grindle M, Thomas J (1991). Public Choices and Policy Change: The Political Economy of

Reform in Developing Countries. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press.

Even though we knew there were going to be resistance, we did not fully anticipate how serious this could be. The union of teachers was worried that the long process of records verification and identification as well as creating bank accounts for majority of the teachers who did not have any, would delay salaries unnecessarily and make teachers suffer.

The Education Secretaries realized that the e-payment policy would take staff salaries out of their hands and along with that the financial benefits and the immense power that it had given them. The Bank that had for many years received the monthly deposit from the State Education Board was not happy that it would suffer huge financial loss if the account was taken away to the bank that would carry out the e-payment. The State Education Board was aggrieved that the Ministry was dabbling in what was strictly its business; and as it turned out, the members also had personal financial gains to protect in form of the monthly “PR” gifts from the bank, and “returns” that the various Education Secretaries were bringing out of the “savings” from staff salaries. There was yet another angle to all these.

It turned out that the decision to deposit the teachers’ monthly salaries with that particular bank was taken with the knowledge of the Ministry of Finance and the Office of the Accountant General who had pledged the account as part of the agreement that brought in the bank as one of the consortium of banks that financed the State’s Commercial Agriculture project. Therefore, the moment the bank received a notice that the account would be taken away, they in turn wrote to the ministry of Finance threatening to pull out of the consortium on the agriculture project, and withholding immediately its contribution of about half a million USD that was due to the project. It was doubtful that even the State Governor who had whole heartedly supported the reform efforts would allow this to happen. Also, even though we did know this at the time, the bank was already in serious trouble and if it loses the teachers’ salaries account, its monthly balance sheet would be further eroded.

Despite the numerous challenges that we faced, it was clear to us that the most important stakeholders that we must have on our side was the union of teachers. We had to show them how they would ultimately benefit from this exercise: how it would no longer be possible to short-change teachers or make arbitrary deductions from their salaries; how it would solve the problem of ghost workers and save us money that could then be used in meeting some of the union’s demands for leave bonus and annual salary increment, which had been outstanding. We also included the Union leadership in the committee that carried out the screening and verification of teachers.

While we tried to manage other interests and stakeholders, we resolved to forge ahead knowing that if we were able to get a quick result that we could showcase to everyone,

most especially the Governor, we would have won the larger part of the battle and get the general public on our side.

The first indication of result came at the end of February, when after paying all the known teachers, more than half a million USD was left in the bank account unclaimed. We waited to see if the same thing would happen in March before making our discovery known to the Governor and the public. It turned out that the same saving was made for the month of March. Also at this time, despite the inconveniences of the first month, teachers who used to wait in the schools for hours past closing time to get their cash payment were now receiving 'credit alerts' on their mobile phones that their salaries have been paid to their bank accounts. In addition to the prestige this brought, there was also the safety benefit as many of the teachers, especially in the rural areas, have in the past been attacked by robbers who knew they were getting paid. And what more, for the first time teachers were getting the full amounts they were entitled to because frivolous and arbitrary deductions were no longer possible.

When we reported this to the Governor, he immediately directed an investigation and also approved that all the Education Secretaries should proceed on leave and the State Universal Education Board should hands off teachers' salaries until the investigating Panel submits its reports. At this point, no one was willing to openly oppose the e-payment for fear of being seen as an accomplice or a beneficiary of the corruption that had gone on for years.

Even though the discovery of this systematic corruption led us to uncover so many other abuses, the unintended consequences turned out to be the most important to our reform efforts. The suspension of the LGEA secretaries presented us the opportunity we never had to re-organise that very crucial level of education management in the State. Their indictment provided the basis for us to call for and start implementing far-reaching re-organization of the Basic Education Board and the Local Government Education Authorities in the State. This way, we were able to bring in technically competent people at all levels through a competitive selection process and also strengthen the accounting systems.

The knock on effect of this also was that it had set the precedence for other equally sensitive re-organisations. When a few months after, we proposed that the set of officers known as the Local Schools Supervisors should be disbanded and their jobs advertised to enable us bring in qualified and competent people, the resistance was not more than a low whimper. But the impact was huge. These are the people that have now been transformed to Schools Support Officers (SSO), who now visit schools on weekly basis to support teaching of literacy and numeracy. They themselves are supported by an entirely new group that we created and named the State Schools Improvement Team (SSIT).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to explain how political participation build extensive expectations of privileges and patronage opportunities. I have tried to show how the various reforms we introduced to improve the quality of education have challenged these expectations and undermined patronage opportunities. I have tried to emphasise that more than the technical soundness of our reform actions, our relative success has been determined by the strategic maneuvering around the political contentions instigated by the reform.

We have succeeded in creating the consciousness that things can be done differently. We have shown that merit counts and it can get you somewhere. We have returned discipline to our schools, by showing that when you break rules, you will be punished. We have restored the dignity and the assertive capacity of the ministry and other supply institutions. We have returned the authority of the heads of schools to them. Our State is no longer a safe haven for people who want to do examination malpractice. We have audited out teaching resources and we now know exactly how to respond to the problems of poor teaching quality and we have responded. We have reformed the primary school curriculum to focus on literacy and numeracy and we have set learning targets. We are developing teaching manuals and we continue to upgrade the skills of our teachers as we introduce active learning techniques into our schools. We have reformed the inspectorate system and established the Quality Assurance Bureau. We are reforming the Colleges of Education to bring their curriculum in line with the needs of basic education. We have changed the way we recruit our teachers and we have established the Teacher Recruitment and Promotion Committee (TRAPCO). In many of these areas, we lead the way in Nigeria as many other States across the country continue to visit to share our experience.

I believe the chance for success in our reform is high. But there is still a long way to go. A lot would depend on our capacity to deepen the reform and build a momentum that is difficult to reverse. One strategic option is to seek to 'ring fence' the reform with a legal infrastructure that would make it difficult for a future administration to reverse.

However, I am convinced that the most important challenge that we face on the road to sustainability is to make education reform a major political agenda, while also showing some real results, which fortunately have began to emerge. However, even within the short time that we started, we have began to see real results. The overall performance in the Junior Secondary Schools Examination (JSSCE) in 2007 when we started the reform, even with high level of malpractices then was 32.4%. In the current year examination, written by children who were in Primary 6 when the reform started; the overall performance shows 54% with credit level pass.

The Baseline Survey conducted in 2006 to assess the proficiency of primary 4 pupils in literacy and numeracy reported 8.2% average performance in numeracy and 24% in literacy. A repeat assessment conducted in 2009, recorded 47.9% for numeracy and 49.2% for literacy among primary 4 pupils in the State. This is evidence that real change is possible. In another 2 years, these children will transit to Junior Secondary, and 3 years after, they will transit to Senior Secondary. The implication of this is that in less than a decade, we would have turned around the fortune of education in Kwara State.

Yet again, this brings us back to the issue we started with: Politics. We must strengthen the quality of participation by the people in such a way that they can demand what issues are prioritized by the political elite. In this wise, political education is very important to redefine the meaning of public expectations. As long as the mass of the people continue to measure the efficiency of public officers by the level patronage they could dispense, the basis to demand accountability will always be undermined. But when the people are sufficiently empowered to focus on the greater good, the chance that public office would be used to promote the greater good is indeed high. The 'Greater Accountability' component of our reform, which has brought in the Schools Based Management Committees (SBMCs) as well as closer engagement with civil society organizations like the Civil Society Action and Coalition for Education For All (CSACEFA) have provided strong impetus for the wider public engagement with the reform and demonstrated that even with public sector reforms, it needs not be all about the government.

ENDS