

# THE IMPERATIVE OF TEACHING HISTORY IN NIGERIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: THE NEED TO REKINDLE STUDENTS' INTEREST IN THE SUBJECT.

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## ABSTRACT.

There is a great decline in students' enrolment of History in senior school certificate examinations conducted by the West African Examinations council (WAEC) and National Examination council (NECO). This poses a great challenge to historians in view of the role of History in the development of a nation. The problem of the unwieldy nature of the History syllabus which is far above the level of the secondary school students for whom it is meant, the lack of resourcefulness and the inability of most History teachers to adopt good methodology of teaching the subject reduce students interest in enrolling History in senior school certificate Examination.

There is the need to rekindle students interests in the subject for we can not have a true perception of the present that is not strongly influenced by a version of the past which History stands for.

The aim of this article is to solicit the efforts of the teachers and the government towards rekindling the interest of the students in the subject.

## Introduction

The importance of history to other aspects of life – political, social and economic can not be over emphasized. Chaffer and Taylor (1977) sees history as more than a discipline for investigating the past. Wake (1969) defined it as a narrative, constructed from evidence, that we find acceptable. Marwick (1970), stated that history is a social necessity which existed long before its study became academic. History is to the community what memory is to the individual. Drawing upon experience from both in Africa and in schools in other parts of the world will help to clarify the purposes in teaching history in Nigerian secondary schools. History is not what you thought, it is what you can remember. It's aim is to bestow a heritage.

The aim of this article is to discuss the problem of decline in the interest of students in the choice of history in senior school certificate examinations and to make useful suggestions aimed at rekindling students' interest in the subject. The role of history in national development will precede the main discussion.

## The Role of History in National Development

History deals mainly with facts that have consequences. Therefore what interests the historian is not just the events of the past but their consequences. It is only the study of history that can reliably separate past events that have consequences from those that merely occurred. Those events that have consequences teach lessons that can enable us correct our past mistakes.

The knowledge of history helps to understand the present problem and thus offer solution. As Rogers (1984) pointed out, history has a crucial role to play because it is scarcely possible to understand a practical present problem without a sound knowledge of its background and development. The study of history becomes very important because the whole frame of reference within which the present is perceived has been drawn from an image of the past. It is this that indicates the importance of history in education. Some sort of version has already affected every child by the time he enters school. Without historical education there will be nothing that will monitor the development of the framework within which the child will come to see the world. Therefore the problem of adult misconception will be perpetuated. The reason for this is that we can not have a perception of the present that is not strongly influenced by our past experience. Those things we have internalized when we were growing up and articulated in our adult lives will determine how we understand and behave towards events in our present world.

Another important role of history in education is that it will enable us understand other subject areas. The existing structures of all branches of knowledge are the products of developments cover time. Therefore to fully understand those other branches of knowledge there is the need to look at them from the historical perspective. Thus to fully understand science there is the need to study the history of science because a knowledge of its development will help in understanding the concepts.

As Conant (1951) pointed out in his book 'on understanding science' it is likely that if a subject and particularly its 'know-how' is really to be understood then case studies from its historical development may have a most valuable part to play.

History play a crucial role in integrating other subjects in the school curriculum. Stenhouse (1968) posited that at a time when there is a marked trend towards 'breaking down subject barriers and integrating the curriculum with a resulting proliferation of rather shallow and artificial schemes based on little more than casual association of content, history provides a reasoned basis for binding together the curriculum. That basis may consist of the network of connections among the subjects of the curriculum that the historical records and the historical elements in their study that all should variously employ. History thus help in attaining the national goals of Nigerian education as endorsed by the National Policy on Education. These goals as outlined in the National Policy on education (2004) include:

- a. a free and democratic society;
- b. a just and egalitarian society;
- c. a United, strong and self-reliant nation;
- d. a great and dynamic economy and
- e. a land of bright opportunities for all citizens.

In this period of our national history when there is emphasis on science and technology, the study of history becomes very paramount because it is only our knowledge of history that will enable us know how other nations attained technological advancement. As we continue to forge ahead our knowledge of history will enable us identify the areas we have made mistakes and correct them.

The study of history is essential for effective policy making and national planning. It is important for all policy makers of a country to study and understand thoroughly the history of their nations political, economic and social developments. This study will help to reveal the problems confronting the nation and policies aimed at combating these ills are initiated. Perhaps the neglect of history could be responsible for the failure of most plausible and laudable programmes hither to initiated by the various governments in the federation.

Another important area where history contributes to education is in the enlargement of the capacity of its students. Just as mathematics increases the human capacity for dealing with concepts of numbers, and the study of language does the same thing in respect of words, so does history afford the opportunity for students to increase their capacity for dealing with questions involving people. (Brown 1981). One needs thought in order to weigh the pros and cons of any possible interpretation one may want to give on human data. This acts as check on all ill-considered action. People who have acquired the historical habit of weighing evidence are not likely to advocate for mass crimes or violence. This is not because those who have acquired historical knowledge develop critical mind for analyzing issues but because it enables one to exercise imagination and make projection into the future. A large part of history's contribution to education is that it can extend pupils understanding of people, their actions and their motives (Chaffer and Taylor, 1977).

#### **Declining Interest in The Choice Of History in Senior School Certificate Examinations**

My experience as a history teacher and examination officer in charge of students enrolment for external examinations in Senior School Certificate Examinations between 1993 and 2005 in three schools in Aniocha North Local Government Area of Delta State, viz; Onicha Ugbo Girls Grammar School, Onicha Ugbo, Martin College Isele-Uku and Pilgrim Baptist Grammar School, Isele-Uku has shown that in recent times there has been a great decline in the enrolment of students for history in senior school certificate examinations conducted by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) and National Examination Council (NECO). This decline in the offering of the subject in secondary schools is of great concern to the historians. The question that comes to mind now is what brought about this decline in the discipline that was so exciting from the 1960s to the 1980s? Worried about the decline of the subject, Plumb (1984) asks, "Is the Death of the past imminent in our schools?". Several reasons have been advanced for this turn of events.

One of such reasons is the complain from students about "too many dates" in history which are difficult to remember. Research has shown that most adolescent pupils could not grasp the useful meaning behind date- for them history was one damn thing after another Jahoda (1963). This problem of chronology has been on for over a century now. The problem has been how to teach a past that students can identify.

The nature of the history syllabus which is too wide, unwieldy and far above the level of the students for whom it is meant constitute another big problem. This voluminous nature of the history curriculum makes it difficult for most history teachers

and students to cover the syllabus within the specified period. The teacher is thus faced with the problem of battling with time to cover a very wide curriculum. The fear that inability to cover the content of the syllabus might lead to failure makes the students to loose interest in the subject.

Moreover, some history teachers are not properly trained. Because they are ill-equipped, they lack the expertise and methodology to make the subject interesting. They thus kill the students interest with boredom and dullness.

Lack of resourcefulness by most history teachers also constitutes another big problem to the subject. Some teachers who read history in the Universities and Colleges of Education sometimes prefer to teach subjects outside their discipline. Today more than 60% of history graduates posted to secondary schools are teaching subjects outside their discipline. They are found to be teaching subjects like Government, Christian Religious Studies, Social Studies and English Language or Literature while history remains without a teacher. It is very sad and indeed ridiculous to see a school with up to three history graduate teachers yet in senior school one (SSI) history is not offered as a course of study. The immediate criticism has been of traditional presentation: excruciating dangerously dull and what is more, of little apparent relevance (price 1968).

The discouragement given to the subject by the government sometimes contributes a great deal to students' lack of interest. There is undo emphasis on science and technology yet the polices initiated towards its attainment are not properly implemented. For example almost all schools in Delta State have equipments for introductory technology at the junior secondary school level, but how many schools in the state are using these equipments? They are either left to rust or are stolen from the workshops. In 1985 the Bendel State Government directed all graduates in history and other courses mainly in the Arts to seek employment in other states. That year many history graduates including this author went to Ondo State to pick temporary appointment that was terminated after one year. This is enough to discourage prospective history students for nobody will like to study a course without job prospect.

#### Rekindling Interest in the Subject

The decline in the interest of students has generated a lot of concern among history scholars. Researches have been conducted in order to bring back the lost glory of history into the school curriculum and encourage more students to offer the subject in senior school certificate examinations conducted by WAEC and NECO.

In the year 2000, the Historical society of Nigeria out of great concern for the decline in the enrolment of history in senior school certificate examinations in Nigerian secondary school system, set up committees to review the existing secondary school history syllabus and make recommendations that will make the teaching of history effective. The committee headed by professor S.C. Ukpabi among other things noted:

1. that the existing syllabus was too wide, unwieldy and far above the level of students for whom it is meant; and
2. that many secondary school teachers lacked the historical expertise and teaching methodology necessary for effective teaching.

The committee made the following recommendations

1. that the revised syllabus should have a proper focus- mainly on Nigerian history with a broad background of West African history.
2. history teachers should be properly trained in both the subject matter of history and in the methodology of teaching history.
3. history teachers should be innovative in their teaching approach. Teaching aids, excursions to historical sites of importance (past and contemporary), fieldwork for collection of oral traditions and other data, and films should be used to promote greater understanding and interest among students and
4. there should be alternative papers for example, on historiography, to further enrich the syllabus and give the students some option based on their interests, in preparing for, and answering the examination questions.

The recommendations of these scholars centred on the nature of the history syllabus and the methodology of the history teacher. These are laudable recommendations that if implemented will change students orientation about the subject. While not trying to elaborate on the points already listed above, it is hoped that if curriculum planners take into cognizance the interest of the students for whose purpose it is framed and teachers adopt better teaching methods, students interests in the subject will be aroused.

History teachers should be resourceful in order to solve the problem of chronology in history. They should show the students tangible evidence or create imaginative involvement and thus create in them a past they can identify. One way of doing this is through visits to historical sites and archive so that the students can have a documentary evidence of what they have learnt in class. The purpose of this visit apart from showing tangible evidence could also be to present an established narrative, support, justify, analyze or even criticize the evidence.

There is also the need to train and retrain history teachers on the modern techniques of teaching history to make it more interesting to the students History teachers should take advantage of in-service training programmes to improve on their methodology. They should be encouraged through sponsorship to attend workshops and conferences organized by professional bodies like, the Historical Society of Nigeria.

## CONCLUSION

The author does not pretend to possess all the right pressing knobs to an "open sesame" of the future direction of teaching history in secondary schools in Nigeria. He has however attempted to highlight some of the problems militating against students' interest in the choice of history in senior school certificate examinations. He has also suggested that history teachers should make the subject more interesting by taking the students out on field trips and attend professional conferences organized by the Historical society of Nigeria. He called on curriculum planners to make the content of the history syllabus to be more relevant to the age of the students for whom it is meant. He called on the government to encourage the discipline by making history a compulsory subject in the senior school certificate examinations and to employ more history teachers in the secondary schools.

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