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## Positioning the African Child for Global Relevance through Education

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### 1. Introduction

I consider it a rare privilege to have been chosen to address this august gathering of former students of Baptist Grammar School, Isanlu-Isin and distinguished sons and daughter of Africa on the topic: Positioning the African child for Global Relevance through Education. This topic is particular apt in the wake of May 27 which has been set aside to celebrate children worldwide.

I welcome the President and Chairman of the Board of Anike Foundation, Dr Segun Ige, who has come all the way from the United States of America to be a part of this celebration. On behalf of the black race, I express our appreciation of your efforts, commitment and passion to use the Anike Foundation to add value to the life of the African Child through education. I am aware that the foundation has presence in Cameroon, Ghana and Uganda. I am confident that the seeds you have sown will germinate and blossom into intellectual health for our youths. The fruits and fragrance of your labour of love will help the youngsters whose lives are touched by the Foundation to discover their potential and translate into positive transformation of the black race from obscurity to prominence on the world canvas.

It was Thomas Jefferson who once said, "if you expect a nation to be ignorant and free, you expect what never was and what never will be." We all know that education is the bedrock of both personal and national development. It is the foundation for higher living standards and an important tool in the long-term eradication of poverty in the Third World.

The importance of education in the life of the African child cannot be overstated. This is because not only does it help them to think clearly and assist them to understand their past and present as Africans, it also equips them with the knowledge and required skills to proffer solutions to the challenges facing us as citizens of a changing world.

Many of us, especially the elite, take pride in sending our children abroad to study. What we fail to realise is that children that study in Toronto, Birmingham, Paris or Zurich hardly ever return to develop their fatherland. They grow up to think like Americans, Britons or Canadians, because they have been educated to respond to American, British or Canadian sentiments and values. Of course, such children never fail to return home to give 'a befitting burial' when their parents pass on. A week or two after, they return abroad, never to be seen again on this side of the equator. As a parent, I expect much more than a befitting burial from my children. For instance, I expect them to justify their creation as Nigerian citizens, Yoruba scions and Ayoola descendants.

Today's African child is desperate for world class academic training and an environment that would enable him/her to reach his/her full potential as a bona fide citizen in the new emerging global village. Unfortunately education in Nigeria is faced with a myriad of problems. Chief among these is poor funding which translates into poor educational infrastructures, inadequate teaching aids and backward facilities. Lack of good public education easily contributes to many social ills which include several unpatriotic acts being perpetrated by our youths and sometimes the breakdown of law and order in our urban centres.

I am a product of the free primary education (known as Awolowo school) embraced by the government of the defunct Western State during my primary school days. Sadly, the public primary school I attended in the mid-sixties is now a shadow of what it used to be. The buildings are dilapidated, the classrooms are bereft of children, yet the registers are filled with the names of fictitious pupils. The teachers are more concerned with their wages than their obligation to the pupils.

The Nigerian child is lean and hungry; she often hawks to supplement her family income; her school library, where they exist at all is filled with antiquated books; the science laboratory is dusty and dingy and the playing field is either overgrown with weed or going bald. This is the scenario that is replicated in many parts of Nigeria today. How do we expect such a child to compete with her Korean, Arab, Ghanaian, Chinese or English counterpart?

By the early 80's private nursery-primary schools proliferated in our cities because public primary schools could no longer meet the expectations of discerning parents. And by the 90's, mission and government secondary schools that had hitherto been respected were deserted in droves because they could no longer make students earn the required five credits in the West African School Certificate Examination (WASCE). Even the so-called Unity Schools and Federal Government colleges are nothing to write home about. Public schools virtually surrendered in the face of poorly paid teachers, overcrowded classrooms, unruly pupils, poor government funding and inept supervision.

Year 2000, which marked the beginning of a new millennium ushered in as well the proliferation of private universities in Nigeria. While this was a welcome development in a sense, it enabled the government to totally abdicate its responsibility of educating the Nigerian child. Consequently, many Nigerian children these days, especially the children of elites, undergo primary, secondary and university education without any government input. A nation that allows its children to be nurtured and educated

without its input should not expect any form of loyalty from such children. Such children will grow up to be loyal to themselves and probably their parents and friends, but certainly not to their fatherland.

## 2. The Challenge of Globalisation

Globalisation is the term used for the process of increasing the connectivity and interdependence of the world's markets and businesses. The globalisation of our modern world has opened windows of opportunity for mostly developed nations but slammed the doors of opportunity in the face of developing nations such as ours. Whereas a steep rise in the volume of foreign trade and investment over the last twenty years have transformed standards of living in industrialised countries, the number of sub-Saharan Africans living in extreme poverty has risen.

Globalisation has commoditised labour migration; hence the opportunities that it offers for securing jobs abroad is often viewed as one of its positive characteristics. However, many anti-globalisation activists complain that globalisation has lost its broader meaning and become synonymous with the advance of capitalism. Some even perceive it as Americanization and a new form of cultural imperialism.

As we are seated here today, the stampede remains unabated at the gates of Western embassies in Lagos and Abuja. Thousands of applications are mailed daily for American visa lottery and right of abode in the UK. Nigeria, more than any other black African country, specialises in producing youths for export to the West in spite of her desperate needs for their services. Developed countries continue to attract both our best brains and our school drop-outs. While the former fill up strategic vacancies in academia and industry, the latter are tossed into an inhuman system, which squeezes, spins and stretches them into incapacitation and early retirement.

Most low paying, back-breaking and undignified jobs such as domestics, back shop assistants, factory hands and warehouse porters are reserved exclusively for such ill-educated migrants. In no time at all, race pride, family honour, character and many of the positive attributes that accompanied them into the new country of their dream soon desert them. While some accept second class citizenship and poverty as a matter of course, some drift into crime and crooked living, and many more wobble up and down the escalator of underachievement.

We are losers, as it were, in the global scramble not because of the colour of our skin but because of the low quality of our education. The challenge for Nigeria and other Sub-Saharan African nations is to take the education of their children more seriously. Education is a leveller of some sort. When multinational corporations, companies and international organisations are looking for the best brains to give them an edge over their competitors, they concentrate more on the intellectual potential of the applicant than the colour of his or her skin.

## 3. Educating the Nigerian Child

We have affirmed in this paper that public education in Nigeria is in dire straits. We need to appreciate the fact that there is a limit to which we can look up to the Federal and state governments for a complete solution to our perennial educational problems. As a matter of fact, the government has tactfully played the ball into our courts. In Lagos State for instance, several mission schools have been returned by the

state government to their former owners. This is because instead of producing tomorrow's leaders, such schools were producing the flotsam and jetsam of society, epitomised by "area boys" and other social miscreants.

The primary education sector is probably the most troubled of the three tiers of education in Nigeria. Nigeria has to change her value system and invest more on education, which is the intellectual laboratory of a nation and the engine that propels the economy. As parents, we all know that quality education does not come cheap. Our children's education gulps a substantial percentage of our family budgets. I expect this experience to be replicated at the federal, state and local government levels. Since education is the only sure avenue to national development, it is impossible for a nation to move forward without a formidable intellectual base that can be found only in its children.

I often think we educated people are too complacent, probably because many of us can afford private education for our children. Or is it because of our poor perception of the role of education in human resource development? Not too long ago, the former British prime minister, Tony Blair, declared that his government would pursue only three policies. The first is education, the second is education and the third is education. His operating slogan was "Education, education, education".

Likewise, former American president, George W. Bush, declared, "American students will be first in the world in Mathematics and Science, every adult American will be literate and possess the skills necessary to compete in a global economy ..." If leaders of advanced nations could be this passionate about education, then we shouldn't look too far for the reasons why we still remain in the woods 50 years after independence.

In Nigeria today, public education leaves a lot to be desired. Teachers are not motivated sufficiently to show up regularly at work; they are more interested in collecting their share of the national cake. According to John F. Kennedy, "Children whose education suffers from overcrowded classrooms or underpaid teachers can never gain back what they have lost – and it is the nation's loss as well as theirs."

I also like to observe that we often overlook the plight of children with special needs, either because they are in the minority or because we are not sufficiently burdened to fight their corner. Parents, especially mothers, are left alone to singlehandedly battle with nurturing children with Down's Syndrome, Sickle Cell disorder, visual/hearing/speech and other defects. What help are we rendering to children in conflict zones such as Jos and the Niger Delta region? Laws have to be enacted and policies have to be put in place to give children like these a fair chance in our society so that they too can be a part of our nation's future.

In spite of this dismal scenario, the Federal, state and local governments consistently allocate too little money to the education sector. The Education Trust Fund's (ETF) fire brigade "intervention", epitomised by the shameless scribbling of its name on cheap school houses along busy highways, amount to too little too late. Our nation can be likened to a dysfunctional family that handles the education of its children lackadaisically. Something is inherently wrong with a modern nation that does not give utmost priority to the education of its children.

It is for this reason that foundations, NGOs, religious organisations, well-placed individuals and companies should be encouraged to step in and help redress this malaise. The restoration of quality public education in our nation should be the priority of influential Africans like you and I who are what we are today because we attended good mission or state funded schools.

#### 4. Conclusion

I congratulate the Anike Foundation for offering to stand in the gap in places where government help could not be accessed. The foundation has formed partnerships with several grassroots non-profit organisations in three countries in West, Central and East Africa. The foundation and its partners deserve commendation for achieving so much in barely three years of its existence. However, it is necessary that you ensure that the books and materials you send to Africa are not only relevant and current, but reach ordinary students and pupils in remote African locations.

It is also essential that we identify gifted children even when they are tucked away in faraway places on our continent, expose them adequately and develop them so that they can be a part of the solution to the challenges we face as a people.

I am aware that many of our well illustrated children's textbooks are printed in Malaysia and all the pencils used in our schools are from China. Companies should be encouraged to produce educational and instructional materials for our schools and institutions.

If we keep failing to give adequate and quality education to children at the elementary and secondary levels, our tertiary institutions would continue to be populated by those who are least prepared to face the rigors of university education. Our children should be exposed to an all inclusive education that would make them proud of their language, cultural heritage and identity as Nigerians.

The education our children receive should be such that will improve their communication skills, enhance their proficiency with multimedia and information technology and give them unfettered access to the world wide web. Aside from enhancing their creativity and productivity, such an education will effectively position them for relevance as Nigerians and ultimately players in the emerging global village.

I like to encourage all of us here this morning, especially the former students of Baptist Grammar School, Isanlu-Isin to strive towards adding value to the lives of the pupils of your former school. Quality education does not come cheap; hence whatever you decide to do will not come cheap. I am confident that with God on your side, you will be able to touch the life of another African child through such a gesture and make a difference in the life of our nation.

We should not be tired of investing in the education of our children because our progress as a nation can only be measured with our progress in education. Education is the sure way of positioning our children for relevance in a new world where boundaries between nations, gender and race are fast disappearing.

Thank you for listening.

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Dr Kehinde Ayoola has a few literary works to his credit. They include The Running Woman, Time to Return Home, The Minister's Mother's official Car and other Stories and The Healing power of Love. Kehinde is married to Taiwo and they are blessed with three children.

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