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A Critique of the Blueprint on Education for the Gifted and Talented Persons in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT A blueprint is a springboard for achieving target goals in any given endeavor. In 1986, a blueprint was prepared by the National Planning Committee on Education for the Gifted and Talented Children in Nigeria. Any form of defect recorded while formulating the blueprint will automatically affect goal achievement. It is against this background that the writer highlights all the inadequacies in the blueprint after which a position is taken with the belief that all the anomalies will be rectified and the desired goal will still be realized. Finally, considering the multi-modal nature of gifted education programme, the writer is of the opinion that the financial implications of running the programme are far reaching. It is therefore recommended that both the public and private sectors should team up with the three tiers of Government and be adequately involved in its funding.

INTRODUCTION

A blueprint can be described as a specification of plan of action in any given endeavor or task. According to Nwazuoke (1995), a blueprint serves as a springboard or vehicle for achieving set goals in any given endeavor since it provides the focus or direction. Experience has shown that any form of defect recorded in the formulation of a blueprint will ultimately affect goal achievement.

In view of this, the writer revisited the blueprint on education for the gifted and talented persons in Nigeria. This blueprint was prepared by the National Planning Committee on Education for the gifted and talented children in 1986. A critical study of the blueprint by the writer reveals a lot of inadequacies. It is against this background that the writer highlights the inadequacies discovered in the blueprint after which a position is taken.

The Inadequacies of the Blue Print on Education of the Gifted and Talented Persons

Firstly, the National Planning Committee on Education for the gifted and talented children perceived giftedness mainly in terms of high intellectual performance. While enumerating the characteristics of gifted children, the National planning Committee said "giftedness usually manifest itself in exceptional academic ability". To equate giftedness with high intellectual performance is to present the committee as being myopic in their way of viewing giftedness. According to Nwazuoke (1995), if this is taken, children whose giftedness may be expressed in talent fields other than academic have been screened off.

As regards the issue of resources, the National Planning Committee stated on page six of the blueprint that the successful implementation of the Education of gifted child in Nigeria, given its envisaged great magnitude and high quality, demands the availability of well-trained professional corps of teacher to develop, administer and evaluate the scheme. The committee went further to state that such professionals would be needed to teach in schools where the gifted education programmes are being run at local, state and federal levels while those in the Ministries of Education will be responsible for administration, training, curriculum development, staff development, evaluation and other relevant field assignments. In this regard, the National Planning Committee failed to realize that to just advocate for the availability of a well-trained professional personnel is not enough.

The committee ought to have gone a little bit further to state the minimum qualifications expected of people to be referred to as well-trained professional corps of teachers. This will enable a clearer understanding of the category of people referred to as well trained. .

On the issue of the target population, the committee stated that the target population anticipated for a take-off of the programme in 1987 January was 5% of total primary school population. The committee went further to state that the 5% would be selected in a multi-stage

manner starting from the local governments. For instance, the top 5% of the school population at the local government level would be selected as a first stage. These would then face a state-wide screening exercise which would result in 5% of that group being selected. This group would then go to the third stage, that is, that of screening at the national level where 5% of this group too would be selected. For instance, given a total primary school enrolment of 15million, we shall have seven hundred and fifty thousand pupils (750,000) which amounts to 5% of total population at local government level, thirty- seven thousand, five hundred (37,500) at the state level which is 0.25% of total population and one thousand, eight hundred and seventy-five (1,875) at the Federal level which amounts to 0.0125% of total population. According to the National Planning Committee, this will form the target pool for the initial take off.

The committee went further to recommend that the results of normal school assessments, common entrance examination results for both the federal and state secondary schools, teacher nominations and the considered opinion of a team of experts made up of experienced specialist teachers, psychologists and counsellors be used for screening out the top 5% of the school population. With this idea, it is believed that the committee wants to ensure that the best 5% of the total primary school population in the country is selected. In spite of the merits of this recommendation, it is not without some loopholes which need to be critically examined. .

Furthermore, another inadequacy observed in the blueprint is the recommendation made by the committee that the curricular for the gifted programme be similar to those provided in the 6-3-3-4 system of education. One would have expected the committee to advocate for the use of a unique curriculum for the gifted and talented persons. This becomes very necessary because there is a need for the self- actualization of these intellectual giants and there is also a need for their potentials to be fully tapped through a carefully adapted unique curriculum.

A recommendation was also made on page sixteen of the blueprint that a criterion score depicting a minimum of 95% mastery levels in subjects be maintained by every gifted child to remain in the gifted programme or before the child is promoted to the next level of performance. According to the blueprint, candidates who could not measure up to the above mentioned standard would be revolved back to the regular system. This recommendation is uncalled for. On pages seventeen to twenty one of the blueprint, the management options advocated to include enrichment, ability grouping, acceleration of education programmes, class size, record keeping and assessment, administration, scholarship scheme for the gifted, curriculum flexibility, teacher qualification, research, evaluation and coordination. This list is far from exhaustive. Some useful options which the committee ought to have included were left out.

On the issue of scholarship scheme stated on page 20 of the blueprint, the committee recommended that the local government should provide free education to the top 5% (gifted) children in a state and that the federal government should provide an appropriate education to the top 5% (gifted) children on a country-wide basis.

Similar to the above is the issue of finance and control. The blueprint recommended that the financial responsibilities of the gifted programme be shared by the three tiers of government. Considering the fact that the financial implications of running a gifted education programme are far-reaching, one would have expected the committee to recommend that both the public and private sector should join hands with the three tiers of government in its funding.

Finally, under implementation of the programme, the committee recommended the caliber of teachers that could stretch the gifted children to the highest cognitive level possible and who would encourage them to be explorative, experimental and reflective on page 27, paragraph 2 of the blueprint. According to the committee, teachers with very long teaching experiences may not be tolerant enough of the sometimes erratic learning behaviors of the gifted, while inexperienced teachers may not be able to handle the very flexible, individualized curricular and management techniques that operate in a class for the gifted. The committee therefore recommended that knowledgeable teachers with 5 to 10 years teaching experience be selected and given short intensive courses to start off the programme. One wonders why the committee should prefer teachers with just 5 to 10 years teaching experience to those teachers with very long teaching experiences since it is often said that experience is the best teacher. Furthermore, it is not clear the parameter the committee would use to measure

how knowledgeable a teacher is when a recommendation was made that only knowledgeable ones are selected.

A WAY FORWARD

Having enumerated the inadequacies in the blueprint on education for the gifted and talented persons above, a position is hereby taken on each of the inadequacies.

Firstly, on the issue of perceiving giftedness mainly in terms of high intellectual performance, it stands to reason that to equate giftedness with high intellectual performance is to present the committee as being myopic in their way of viewing giftedness. Reference needs to be made to other talent areas like music, painting, language, mechanical, carving, dancing, leadership, scientific, writing, just to mention but a few. On this issue, Nwazuoke (1995) is of the opinion that such a prejudice obviously has implications for the selection of gifted students. According to him, one such implication is that children whose giftedness may be expressed in talents field other than academic may be screened off.

Comerford and Creed (1983) have extensively discussed the various talent fields where children may express their giftedness and talentedness. These include academic talent, artistic talent, creative talent, dramatic talent, humanities talent, leadership talents, mathematics talent, mechanical talent, modern language talent, musical talent, physical skills talent, scientific talent, social and emotional talent. It is hereby being re-emphasized that other talents fields like those mentioned above and many more need to be included while describing giftedness.

As regards the issue of resources under which the committee recommended the availability of well-trained professional corps of teachers to develop, administer and evaluate the scheme, the committee seems to be ignorant of the fact that to refer to somebody as well-trained professional personnel is relative. The specific qualifications of professional personnel needed to successfully implement the programme of the education of the gifted children in Nigeria ought to have been clearly spelt out.

It would be recalled that while highlighting the inadequacies in the blueprint, it was stated that the target population expected for a take-off of the gifted programme in 1987 was 5% of total primary school population. It was again stated that the five percent would be selected on a multi-stage manner, starting from the local government. It should also be recalled that the committee concluded this aspect by recommending the results of examinations and the considered opinion of a team of experts and specialists that would be used for screening out the top 5% of the school population. Although, this recommendation looks pleasant because if strictly adhered to, the best 5% academically out of the total school population in the whole country will be admitted into the gifted school. However, Oduwole (2003) does not agree with the committee on the idea of using the results collected from a team of experts. The point is that making use of the results collected from a team of experts made up of experienced specialist teachers, psychologists and counsellors may not be reliable enough. The afore-mentioned group of people might be biased in the award of marks due to one reason or the other.

The committee‘s recommendation that the curricular for the gifted programme be similar to those provided in the 6-3-3-4 system of education is another point that leaves much to be desired. Rather than advocating for similar curricular to the one provided in the 6-3-3-4 system of education, a unique curriculum should be adapted for the gifted and talented persons. According to Adelodun (2000), activities for gifted students should differ from those in the regular programme in depth, breadth, precision, pace and kind.

Oduwole (2003) has observed that most regular curriculum has been organized to promote convergent thought. According to him, there is often a single correct answer to a history question, a single proper approach to long division, a single correct spelling for a word, a single proper outline for book reports. Such a school system, which is what we largely operate, would only benefit those who conform to the cognitive styles of the teachers, who reason in convergent modes. In other words, such a curriculum which stresses normal behaviour will ultimately narrow down the perception of the learner.

On the same issue, Adelodun (2004) also observed that a typical gifted and talented person learns in much less time than the ordinary school population. The fact that the talented persons learn rapidly and have little difficulty in grasping new ideas, make most curricular too easy for them. These learners have the ability to juggle several ideas at once. In effect, the gifted and talented see the world differently and understand

phenomena in a qualitatively different way from their less-privileged contemporaries. In view of the above mentioned attributes of the gifted and talented persons, they need unique curricular which would reflect leaps in conceptualizing and not keep them to a lockstep sequence of learning.

Furthermore, the recommendation that a criterion score depicting a minimum of 95% mastery levels in subjects or areas of potentials be maintained by every gifted child to remain in the gifted programme or before the child is promoted to the next level of performance is not good enough. It is surprising to learn from the blueprint that such candidates who cannot measure up to the above mentioned standard will be revolved back into the regular system. The point is that the criterion score depicting a minimum of 95% mastery levels in subjects or areas of potentials is too high. One would have expected the blueprint to just emphasize excellence performance rather than pegging it to 95%. The fact that a person is unable to score up to 95% in a particular subject area should not disqualify him from being a gifted person. He or she may not be able to score up to that all the time.

It would be recalled that the blueprint put in place an administrative design which would serve the pupils according to local needs. According to Nwazuoke (1996), some of the administrative options prescribed include: ability grouping, enrichment, acceleration, class size, record keeping and assessment, curriculum flexibility and others. One would have expected tangible options like peer tutoring, bibliography, advanced instruction, humor and self directed learning to be included in the blueprint.

The issue of scholarship scheme and the funding of gifted programme which the planning committee said should be the sole responsibility of the three tiers of government is another point should be corrected. The funding of the gifted programme and the issue of scholarship award for the gifted and talented persons should not be the sole responsibility of the three tiers of government. Adelodun (2007) is of the opinion that the financial implications of running a gifted education programme are far-reaching considering its multi-modal nature. Therefore, individuals, clubs, organizations and phillantropists in the country should be adequately involved in its funding.

Finally, the committee‘s recommendation, that teachers with five to ten years teaching experience be selected at the expense of those ones with very long teaching experiences to stretch the gifted children to the highest cognitive level possible is another point that leaves much to be desired. Teachers with very long teaching experience should be preferable. The reason for taking this position is that there is an adage which says “experience is the best teacher”. The more experienced a person is in any profession, the more maturely he or she handles any matter related to the profession.

CONCLUSION

It is hereby emphasized that special education in general and education for the gifted and talented in particular is ordinarily more expensive than regular education. In fact, it is estimated by the National Planning Committee that a special school will be three times more expensive to run and maintain than an ordinary school of an equivalent size. However, the truth of the matter is that no matter what expenses are incurred in educating the gifted, their super-normal contribution to the development and sustenance of the society, more than compensates for this. For example, it is a well known fact that it is this “Intellectual Giants” that can launch our society into the much desired technological age.

It is after due consideration of the financial implications of running a gifted education programme that the writer made the recommendation in this paper that both the public and private sectors should team up with the three tiers of government in its funding of gifted education project.

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