

The Hungry Teacher

The teaching profession used to be a noble one, we are told; but in recent times, especially in Ghana, it is seen as a stopgap. There are a lot of people who would have loved to be working as teachers, but the status of teachers in the country has ebbed to the extent that a lot of intelligent people shy away from the profession. Even the little respect that teachers had in the rural areas in the earlier years has been eroded away due to the fact that most teachers in the country live their lives one day at a time: I mean they are poor.

In spite of this challenge that the regular teacher faces, and against other odds, they do the best they can to discharge their duties under the circumstances. And because our governments do not put the interest of the teacher on the front burner, the fabric of our education is being destroyed. The hungry teacher can never be a dynamic and effective one. We should understand that our treatment of teachers' welfare determines the success and progress of the pupils they teach. I am not even talking about psyching them up to intrinsically perform their job, but giving them the reward of their labor.

I remember during my postgraduate studies at the University of Munich in 2005; in our Organizational Psychology class, there was a heated intellectual discourse (argument) about whether intrinsic motivation should be preferable to extrinsic motivation or vice versa. As much as intrinsic motivation is very pivotal in sustaining interest in an activity, neglecting extrinsic motivation without examining the context of the individual and the situation would be counterproductive. The most interesting aspect of the argument was whether a car can motivate an employee to give his best in achieving a goal.

To the Westerners in the class, especially those from Munich, a car is not motivating enough. You cannot fault them because a car is not necessary in Munich since the transport network is very efficient; there are several means to get around the city. What they did not know is that in a country like Ghana or Cameroun or countries in sub-Saharan Africa, owning a car is not only a necessity, but also a luxury and can thus motivate one to go the extra mile in enhancing productivity.

Regarding the importance of teachers, Archer (1999) and Armentano (2003) argue that teachers are the most important influence on student progress, even more important than socioeconomic status and school location. The point I am trying to put across is that until we put measures in place to up the quality of teachers we have in the country and their standard of living, we should understand that we will not be able to attract most of our best brains into the teaching profession.

Many a times I ask myself why we do not witness dynamism in our educational sector. We seem to ignore the essential parameters that need to be addressed in order to experience real (positive) changes in our educational system, and rather focus on trivialities. We find it so easy in playing politics with education in the country and lose track in ensuring that the perennial challenges that have led to the near-destruction of our education system are confronted head-on. The problems that confronted the educational sector in the 20th century are still here with us in the 21st century.

But we regretfully forget that we need to make difficult and bold choices in order to transform the fortunes of education in the country. We are quick to pay fat bonuses and end of service benefits to our soccer heroes and politicians respectfully, but dither in giving the teaching

profession a facelift. If the spontaneity and alacrity used in meeting the needs of these groups of people in our society are used to address the needs of teachers, I promise you that we would be smiling now instead of cursing our stars for our egregious educational standards. This is a clear case of putting the cart before the horse.

Teachers teach for several months without drawing a salary, and yet our governments live under the false illusion that the country is on the path of recovery. What recovery? When teachers teach on empty stomach, what you should expect from them is the production of ill-prepared pupils and not the reverse. When we fail to properly educate our children, we totally fail as a nation. When teachers go hungry for teaching for months without a salary, the end result is the production of incompetent pupils.

Over the years, newly trained teachers and those who are transferred to other districts have to wait for, in most cases a year before they draw their first salary. What is painful is that these teachers are in the first place given peanuts, and to hold their salaries for months is an injustice. It is an injustice to employ somebody to work for you without paying them their due. When somebody supplies their labor, the employer is obligated to provide them the fruit of their labor. This, our governments will not do; and instead punish the already not well-paid teacher. In 1995, I had to wait for 7 months before I drew my first salary whilst working in one of the most deprived hinterlands in the Amansie East District in the Ashanti Region. So we keep teachers hungry for that long and still expect them to perform wonders in a country where it is even difficult for parents to allow their daughters to be married to teachers.

The saddest aspect of this episode is when somebody moves from Europe or the developed world to Ghana and teaches for several months without receiving a dime, and the government looks on while the Ghana Education Service and Ministry of education exhibit this level of apathy. I know somebody who moved to Ghana from Germany last year, started teaching in a village near Offinso in the Ashanti region, and for 9 months has not been given a pesewa. By the time I was writing this article, this female teacher had not seen any signs of deliverance. And I strongly believe that she is not alone in this time-long predicament. What is worrying is that this individual—who is a mother has to commute between Kumasi and Offinso from Monday to Friday. If this is not wickedness on the part of the government, then what is it, folks? If this person and those who are in that genre do not receive support elsewhere, how can they provide our children with the best instruction at school? The hungry teacher will obviously be an unproductive teacher and is likely to displace their frustration and worry on the poor children. When we were pupils our teachers were beating us for no apparent reasons, and I now figure why? They were beating us because they might be teaching without knowing what to eat that evening or provide the basic needs of their children.

What is nauseating and unintelligent about this systemic malfunctioning regarding the nonpayment of the salaries of most public and civil servants, especially teachers on time is that the accumulated salaries are eventually paid, by which time the harm (the production of ill-trained students) has already been caused. This is because most of these teachers stay home as a result of their brokenness and those who teach in the rural areas try to make ends meet by farming. So you see the negative consequence of not paying teachers on time.

When the President promised us the delivery of a better Ghana, some of us who thought that the perennial apathy of our governments towards the welfare of the teacher was going to be a thing of the past, cannot stop but ask the government to be proactive in addressing the needs of the teacher. The political talks and mantra should give way to proactive judgments and

actions. What we need to advance the country is the government taking a look at the needs of one of the pillars and movers of the country—our teachers.

Obviously, there is something wrong with the Ghana Education Service and the Ministry of Education which needs to be examined. If the President is not awaiting another Anas Aremeyaw to investigate the rot at these institutions before paying them a surprise visit, I would suggest that the earlier he took the initiative to ensure that these institutions assume more responsibility in the discharge of their duties, the sorry the state of education in the country would continue to be. We did not vote for a retrogressive or stagnated change, we voted for a change that will lead to the betterment of the country. And this we can obtain when teachers are not made to teach whilst hungry. God bless Ghana!!

Source: Kingsley Nyarko, PhD, Psychologist & Educational Consultant, IAF- Munich, (kingpong73@yahoo.com)