

## **Garfield and I: A Critique of Teacher-Student Relationship in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

Globally, ever-increasing percentage of research in the educational sector is focusing on the relationship and interaction between the teacher and the student. This is in realization of the fact that the teacher is the foot soldier in the process of transforming the plebeian into a statesman or the metaphoric conversion of a piece of marble, wood or concrete mix into a magnum opus of art. Woven around a casual encounter between a professor and a student in a movie theatre in the United States of America in the mid-1970s, the paper subjects the anecdote to critical analysis and dovetails into a critique of the Nigerian educational environment with special reference to tertiary education. Drawing from the result of a four-item questionnaire administered on seven hundred students in seven tertiary institutions in the Niger Delta of Nigeria, the paper concludes that the average lecturer in Nigerian tertiary institutions relates with the students from the position of superiority syndrome thereby impairing the capacity of the student to obtain maximum benefit from the dyadic process. The paper, therefore, recommends that for the educational process to achieve greater success, this phenomenon should be investigated and studied in greater details; and the outcome should be monitored to ensure compliance with the norms of teaching.

Keywords: sorting, proprietary supervision, pedagogical practices, unprofessional pronouncements, is-ought analysis

### **Introduction**

Drawing from the Owenian classic, which holds that man is the most vital instrument of the production process, it is argued that the teacher is the most vital element of the dyadic process of transferring knowledge. In this paper, a general perception of education with special reference to its role in the development of the individual, the community and humanity will be presented; this will be followed by an assessment of the state of affairs in the Nigerian educational sector; beyond these, the brief anecdote of an encounter between a Nigerian student and his professor in the United States of America (US) in 1975 will be narrated. Based on an evaluation of the essence of the anecdote, the teacher-student relationship in the Nigerian tertiary educational environment vis-à-vis what it is and what it ought to be will be subjected to

critical analysis. As an *is-ought* analysis, the paper will focus on the relationship between the teacher and the student in and out of the class with emphasis on the educational process and environment. Thereafter, a review and an analysis of the outcome of the questionnaire will be conducted following which recommendations will be made.

### **Education: A Utilitarian Overview**

On April 4, 1972, President Richard Nixon of the United States of America wrote a letter of appreciation to “Dear Sammy [for] an outstanding [musicomedy] tour of [US] military bases in Vietnam and Hawaii.” At the heel of the letter, Sammy Davis Jnr was invited to White House for lunch with Mr. President. This was at a time when the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jnr was fresh in the minds of African Americans and a musician called James Brown had released a song titled “I’m Black and Proud;” meanwhile, Nixon needed to reach and touch the African American community in a special way preparatory for a second tenure in office. During lunch, President Nixon asked Sammy thus: “How can I do some good racially? Where is the help needed [and] in what form?” We note that the first issue Sammy Davis raised was education. (Davis, 1989) Incidentally, Mr. Davis did not have the privilege of formal education not even for one day; his request was therefore reflective of his realization of the place of education in the liberation of a people and the development of human society.

Human history, from the time human life began, through when the human mind could express itself and the human hand could write and now explore the cosmos, has been pieced together through one word: education. Over the centuries of human existence in the modern age, philosophers, intellectuals, artistes and national and world leaders have spoken stridently and etched extensively on paper, canvas and marble of the pivotal place of education in the development of human society. A timeless, succinct yet exhaustive posit on the importance of education is found in the charge by the Man from Galilee who urged humanity to “ask, and it shall be given you, seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you;” (Matt 7:7) if this statement is taken with incisive thought rather than the insipid and mind-numbing faith that organized religion demands, then one is liable to rhetorically ask: could there be a stronger call for man to seek education? Again, in an assessment of the effects of man’s neglect of education, the literature of Judeo-Christian theology holds that “my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.” (Hosea 4:6)

In another classical on the place of education in human development, Joseph Addison (1672-1719) offers that “what sculpture is to a block of marble, education is to the human soul. The philosopher, the saint, the hero, the wise and the good, or the great very often lie hid and concealed in a plebian, which a proper education might have disinterred and brought to light.” For G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936), “education is simply the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another.” A point that stands crystal clear from the averments of Addison and Chesterton is that they equate education to the soul, which, in every religious belief, is acknowledged as the essence of man’s existence on earth.

### **The Nigerian Educational Environment: A Brief Assessment**

In an editorial, *Daily Trust* decried what it referred to as “the decaying underbelly of Nigeria’s education structure.” Furthering that lamentation, it adds that “our educational policies and institutions used to be the pride of West Africa in the eyes of the rest of the world. Now we are reduced to sending our children to Ghana for secondary and higher education; (*Daily Trust*, Monday, October 5, 2009:19)” corroborating this view, Blumende (2001) offers that the decline in the quality of education cannot be ignored by anyone who is aware of the significant role of education as an instrument of societal transformation and development; in a similar view, Ogunsaju (2004) states that the academic standard in all Nigerian educational institutions has fallen considerably below societal expectations.

The National Policy of Education states that “No Education system can rise above the quality of teachers in the system.” (FGN, 2006) Chall and Popp (1990) offer that there is a need to focus on teachers’ adequacy and competency in respect to their pedagogical practices and strategies and mastery of the curriculum and subject content; concurring, Ijaiya (1998) states that improving the quality of the teaching force in schools is the key to raising student achievement. Thus, raising educational standards should be the government’s number one priority. Similarly, Lassa (2000) and Guga (1998) hold that education cannot be provided by just anybody, it requires a teacher who plans and delivers the lessons or instructions in such a way that objectives can be achieved. The Baguada Seminar Reports on Quantities and Qualities in Nigerian Education also shares the same view that teachers are the main determinants of quality in education: If they are apathetic, uncommitted, uninspired, lazy, unmotivated, immoral, and anti-social, the whole nation is doomed. If they are ignorant in their disciplines and thus impart wrong information, they are not only useless but dangerous. Therefore, the calibre of teachers in the school system determines what the next generation will be. (ESA, 2005)

A teacher walks into the class on the first day and proclaims thus: “Nobody makes an ‘A’ in my class; those who work very hard may make ‘B;’ the rest are ‘Cs’ ‘Ds’ ‘És’ and ‘Fs’.” Subjected to critical analysis and restated, the statement says “I am incapable of imparting knowledge to you in such a way that you earn an ‘A;”” this is clearly self-indictment. In other climes, that teacher would lose his job on that first day and will find it very difficult to get hired as a teacher in any other educational institution; the tragedy is that in Nigeria, he keeps his job; throughout the learning period, he makes it a point of duty to humiliate the students and reduce their sense of intellectual self-worth to zero thereby inhibiting the students’ capacity to assimilate the substance of the lectures; to that extent, he has contributed a weighty negative quota towards building leaders of tomorrow that lack self-confidence. It is this attitudinal disposition and its effect on student performance that inspired this study.

### **Methodology and Scope**

A four-item questionnaire was developed and administered on seven hundred students in six government-owned tertiary institutions and one private university in the Niger Delta of Nigeria with the spread of one hundred per institution. Of the six gov-

ernment-owned institutions, two are owned by the Federal Government while four are owned by two State Governments. Six of the institutions are degree awarding up to doctoral level while one offers remedial program for GCE (Ordinary Level), prepares students for the Interim Joint Matriculation Board Examination (IJMBE) operated from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and awards National Diploma (ND) and Higher National Diploma (HND). The questionnaire was administered in classes with a population of two hundred and above thereby ensuring the homogeneity in the status of respondents. The decision of one hundred per institution was informed by the need for ease of calculation. The institutions are coded A to G for anonymity.

Given lack or paucity of research funding and general apathy towards questionnaires especially on the part of students, the questions were brief and focused on the teacher-student relationship with emphasis on the attitudinal disposition of lecturers. The questions were developed with the realization of the fact that *open-ended* questions afford respondents the latitude of expression that is generally not allowed by closed questions. (Johnson and Joslyn, 1991) In order to keep the questionnaire and the process simple, double-barrel questions were avoided conscious of the fact that the quality of questions reflects on the accuracy or otherwise of responses. While questions 1 and 2 are closed, questions 3 and 4 are open-ended and therefore gave the respondents ample room for fairly detailed accounts of their relationship with the teachers within set parameters.

### **Garfield and I: A Teacher-Student Interchange**

Standing in the queue to purchase a ticket to watch the movie “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” at Murray Theater one Saturday in Fall 1975, a familiar voice thundered thus from a short distance behind me: “Jason, you ought to be in your room studying for the test on Monday.” I turned around and it was Professor Gene Garfield, one of my professors at the Department of Political Science, Murray State University (MSU), Murray, Kentucky, USA; reflexively, I retorted “Gene, you ought to be in your office setting the questions.” “Ok, I’ll deal with you” he threatened and I shot right back “I’ll thoroughly embarrass you, sir.” In reaction to this interchange, other patrons beamed the click-on, have-a-nice-day, stenciled smile that is characteristic of Europe and America as we strolled into the theater to relish the rib-cracking movie with Randle Patrick McMurphy (Jack Nicholson) and his colleagues; the test came and went on Monday. From my transcript, I note that I took two courses in political science (Pol. 345: Introduction to International Relations and Pol. 446: Government and Politics of Western Europe) that semester and earned “A” in both. What this says is that the interchange at the movie theatre did not adversely affect my grade.

### **A Critique of Teacher-Student Relationship in Nigeria**

Situate the above teacher-student interchange in the Nigerian tertiary educational environment and the student might have been doomed. One of the maladies of the Nigerian educational environment is frigid teacher-student relationship. Mammoth majority of teachers function in that relationship from the perspective of *superiority syndrome* thereby subjecting the students to the position of good-for-nothing under-

dogs of the relationship. Again, a worrisome percentage of lecturers predetermine the number of students that will score 'A' or 'B' and some lecturers audaciously announce on the first day of class thus: "no student makes an 'A' in my class; the best you can obtain is 'B' if you are that good." Subjected to deep thought, we would realize that this pronouncement is rather tragic and the tragedy is that the teacher (1) uses the word "make" instead of "earn," a tell-tale of a possible undercurrent in the system (2) invariably, the pronouncement essentially says: "I do not possess the capacity to nurture anyone of you to earn an 'A'." In every sense, this is self-indictment. In other climes, such a teacher would lose the job immediately and (3) the psychological effect of such utterly reckless and unprofessional pronouncement is clearly demoralizing, intimidating and discouraging for students. What the statement means is that no student will be given an "A" even if he/she earns it.

### **Research**

Based on the introductory anecdote, a four-item questionnaire was developed with necessary adjustments to suit the Nigerian educational environment. The brevity of the questionnaire is to ensure ease of administration and sustenance of responder attention, which is a major problem in research as a result of student apathy to such exercises and this is an attitudinal disposition that may be associated with the stress of the educational environment.

### *Questionnaire*

Background:

It is Saturday night and you are on the ticket queue at a movie theatre in the community of your institution; at a distance on the queue you see your professor whose examination is billed for Monday but he did not see you. Would you:

1. A. Stay to see the movie  
or  
B. Quietly leave the theatre ensuring he does not see you

If you opt to stay (as in "A" in 1 above), would you

2. A. Say hello to him  
B. Ensure he does not see you  
or  
C. Not bother if he sees you

3. On a scale of one to ten where one represents the lowest score and ten represents the

highest score, rate your teacher on the following:  
Friendliness/Cordiality:

4. Comment freely on any aspect of teacher attitude to work in your Institution

### Outcome and Analysis

The responses to questions 1 and 2 are as tabulated as follows:

#	Inst.	Own	Question 1		Question 2		
			A	B	A	B	C
1	A	Fed	2	98	0	2	0
2	B	Ste	3	97	0	3	0
3	C	Fed	5	95	0	5	0
4	D	Ste	99	1	0	0	1
5	E	Ste	3	97	0	3	0
6	F	Ste	2	98	0	2	0
7	G	Pvt	98	2	0	0	2
			204	496	0	15	3

**Table 1:** Legend: Inst. (Institution), Own (Ownership), Fed (Federal), Ste (State), Pvt (Private)

### Analysis

We note from Q#1 that of the 700 students 493 (70.8%) would quietly leave the theater while 204 (29.1%) would stay; furthermore, respondents from Institutions D (4) and G (7) indicated high percentages (99% and 98%) of confidence, respectively. The gapping disparity between the responses by students of Institutions A, B, C and F on one hand and students of Institutions D and G on the other hand called for further inquiry. An independent variable is the fact that Institution G is private-owned where proprietary supervision and discipline are paramount and stringent; as such, the phenomenon of sorting is not prevalent in the institution. While the other institutions are public-owned, further investigation revealed that the respondents in Institution D were being prepared for external examination; this means that the lecturers played little or no role in their final examinations (independent variable).

On Question #2 (column A), of the students who said they would stay to watch the movie none would "say hello" to the lecturer; this implies lack of cordiality between the teacher and student. Restated all respondents except students from Institutions D and G did not want the lecturer to see them. That all the respondents in Institutions A, B, C, E and F who opted to stay and see the movie would ensure that they are not seen indicates (1) that lecturers approach the relationship from the viewpoint of *superiority syndrome* (2) lack of partnership approach in the dyadic enterprise (3) frigidity in the student-lecturer relationship.

**Question 3**

On the issue of friendliness/cordiality the following table captures the responses on a scale of 1 – 10.

#	Inst	Own	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	A	Fed	30	20	20	22	8	0	0	0
2	B	Ste	40	24	20	10	6	0	0	0
3	C	Fed	35	40	25	0	0	0	0	0
4	D	Ste	0	0	20	20	35	25	0	0
5	E	Ste	40	35	20	5	0	0	0	0
6	F	Ste	35	35	20	10	0	0	0	0
7	G	Pvt	0	0	0	0	20	20	40	20

Table 2: Legend: Inst. (Institution), Own (Ownership), Fed (Federal), Ste (State), Pvt (Private)

**Analysis**

The responses to Question 3 are captured on Table 2 above. This question was originally structured to focus on the specific lecturers in whose class the questionnaire was to be administered. Expectedly, the approach received heated opposition that had the capacity of scuttling the survey; the questionnaire was, therefore, adjusted by generalizing the target. From the figures, respondents in Institutions A, B, C, E and F rated their lecturers between 1 to 4 points; while Institutions A and B barely crossed into 5 points score, Institutions E and F did not cross the 5 points bar. In Institution D, respondents rated the lecturers within the bracket of 3 and 6 points while in Institution G the lecturers were rated within the bracket of 5 points to 8 points; resulting from this, columns 9 and 10 are not included in Table 2. Note also that it is only in Institution G that the lecturers were rated up to 7 and 8 points. The variables here are: (1) in Institution D the students that were surveyed sat for external examinations where, as stated earlier, the lecturers play little or no role in the final grade (2) Institution G is privately owned and proprietary supervision is paramount.

Question 4, which is open-ended, generated very worrisome responses. The students freely commented on the general attitude of lecturers. Here, the essence of the aphorism “*you study to know; you sort to pass*” featured consistently in the responses of 92% of the respondents. A response that was cold and called for further inquiry is the one that said thus: “*you should find out why many students who graduate with Pass or Third Class degree make Second Class Upper at Law School.*” Responding to this call, (1) an alumnus of the Faculty of Law of that institution was sought out and interviewed at great effort and (2) the Dean of the Faculty of Law of the institution was also interviewed. The former spoke very bitterly of his experience and said many of his colleagues suffered the same fate; he offered to raise a list of other alumni in same situation while the later informed that the faculty does not have

a record of the performance of its students at the Law School. Basic and simple as the research is, it shows the degree to which students are afraid of their lecturers.

### **Challenges of the Research**

The major challenge of the research was funding; this necessitated a reduced scope resulting from which it was limited to institutions in the Niger Delta with six Institutions clustered within three states and the seventh undertaken with great financial stress to ensure that a private institution is included in the research. Other than funding the administration of the questionnaire was welcome by the students especially given the fact that it was anonymous.

### **Recommendation**

Informed by the above findings, it is recommended as follows:

1. Student appraisal of lecturers should be introduced and conducted for every class at the end of every semester; it should not be a yearly traumatic superior-subordinate confrontation
2. The outcome of the appraisals (in 1 above) should be analyzed with caution realizing that some students may use that as a tool of getting back at conscientious teachers
3. The outcome should be taken into consideration alongside other appraisals in the system in determining mobility
4. The scope of this research should be expanded to determine the depth and intensity of the findings and the extent to which it pervades the Nigerian educational environment
5. Objectivity and balance require that the research should also pay substantial attention to the work environment in which the teacher works; the existence and adequacy (or otherwise) of extrinsic motivation, ergonomics and other elements of the profession that stimulate improved performance should be investigated

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

Professionals in education and psychologists, across the world, have concluded that human intelligence is not static: it grows or decreases; in other words, it fluctuates. They also agree that there are two foremost features that continually coalesce in ever varying percentages to determine the quality of human intelligence at any given time. These factors are gene (Nature) and environment (Nurture). While God provides the gene free of charge, educational institutions constitute a major part of the environment as people spend more waking time there during the twenty years between the ages of three and twenty-three.

The interpretations of earlier cited statements on the importance of education by Jesus Christ, Joseph Addison and G.K. Chesterton drum home the pivotal place of education in human development. The educational process, which should be



vibrant and life-giving, can only be ensured by none other than the teacher who comes into one-on-one contact with students. Wilkes offers that:

The student's mind and character are sculpted by the teacher's hand. What the world is going to be like tomorrow depends on what the teachers are doing in the classroom today; society needs to recognize teachers and the educational process as our greatest resource for the future. Undoubtedly, teachers must refill their "well;" burnout is spreading like a disease in the teaching profession at every level. Overwork and classroom stress are claiming the best and brightest of teachers. (Godar, 1990:vii)

Wilkes' deposition as above seems an assessment of the teachers' experience in the Nigeria educational system where teachers are going through excruciating pain from harrowed experiences teaching in a completely unsupportive environment that is impervious to positive change especially in government-owned institutions that constitute more than eighty percent of the total number of tertiary institutions.

Mefor (2011) opines that student-teacher relationship should be mutually respectful and supportive; it is vital and should be nurtured with great care in every educational institution. For the most part of the day, the students stay with the teachers, for the better part of that period, they listen to what the teacher has to teach them; it is then no doubt that their academic performance and behavior will surely be influenced by the quality of their relationship with their teachers. Noteworthy in this regard is the fact that in *School of Life*, the 2005 made-for-television comedy-drama film starring Ryan Reynolds, a teacher (fondly called "Mr. D") adopts what was considered unorthodox teaching methods, his students earn straight As and he receives an award from the District School Board; asked what was the teacher's secret, a pupil answered thus: "he treats us as friends." This tells is that in a relaxed frame of mind, students assimilate better. This is highly instructive; it deserves adequate attention in the teacher-student relationship in the Nigerian educational system.

Teacher appraisal is of topical importance as its main objective is to improve individual performance; it is a means of promoting the organization's ability to accomplish its mission of transforming the plebian into a statesman or the metaphoric conversion of a piece of marble, wood or concrete mix into a magnum opus of art.

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