

"My Educational Journey"

BY

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*On the Occasion of the Maiden annual
Teachers'*

*Award for Excellence in Akwa Ibom
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"My Educational Journey"

**Speech Delivered By Larry Ephraim Ettah
Group Managing Director/Chief Executive Officer
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All Protocols observed,

Let me begin by saying it is indeed a great privilege and a high honour to be here today and moreso to be the Guest Speaker at this maiden *Annual Teachers' Award for Excellence in Akwa Ibom State Public Schools*.

I salute and applaud the vision of the founders of the ***Inoyo Toro Foundation***; my good friend, Udom and his delectable wife, Ntekpe for not just putting their will in supporting education in Akwa Ibom State but also their wallet.

For me this occasion and this neighbourhood have special meaning for another reason but yet connected in some way to why we are here. In this neighbourhood in 1963, a young Branch Manager, working with PZ Industries at Nwaniba Beach now part of the Golf Course of this hotel, met a young lady then starting her teaching career at Uruan County Council School, Nwaniba, Mbiakong only few minutes from here, and fell in love. I am a product of their liaison and subsequent brief marriage as my father soon became one of those unfortunate statistics of the civil war. I possibly was a toddler when I began my educational journey as my mother took me to school and her class since she could not quite possibly afford a baby sitter. I may have been the youngest child in that school's history.

So today my friends, I stand here as a modest testimony of what a son of a teacher and a beneficiary of public school education can become given the opportunity I believe every child in Akwa Ibom State should have. This Award is timely as it is coming when our public educational system has fallen into a lamentable state of distress from decades of under investment both in terms of the infrastructure and the psyche of the teachers who work in the sector. It is coming in an era where it has now become fashionable to send our children to private nursery schools, secondary schools and even universities while those not so blessed are consigned to public school system.

What obtains today in the public school arena in Nigeria is a tragedy born of neglect where the government has overtime become a disinterested guardian of the public good. Permit me to say it does not have to be so and it wasn't always this way.

Teaching was not always that profession where it was a continuous struggle trying to make ends meet at the end of the month, where the rewards was in heaven and life on earth was purgatory. It was a respected, noble and celebrated profession. Teachers were the icons of our society, bastions of reputation, role models and custodians of values and virtues of integrity, candor and hope. Teachers were the leading lights, and shapers of future destinies of the wards in their care and under their watch. Teachers were those shouldering the responsibility for preserving the vitality of the society through educational nourishment of its youth.

That was my experience and possibly yours, as I was privileged to be brought up by a teacher at home and

taught by several others in school. In my life's journey it has become apparent to me that only education provides the ability to climb the ladder of opportunity. Our society will never be an equal one but we must seek to have equality of opportunity so that we can have a mobile society through an education system that equips Akwa Ibom indigenes with general skills to make them mobile and competitive in the Nigerian job market. This award seeks to encourage such an endeavour.

As has been my experience from a village primary school in this neighbourhood to another in Mbiaya Uruan, to yet another at Ndukpo Ise and subsequently to Nuhu Primary School Kankia in Katsina State, before going to Government College, Kaduna and the University of Benin. Our young people will succeed if they have a strong CV that reflects the various schools they attended, the grades they earned, the subjects they studied, languages they speak and the experience they have been through. A good CV allows you to sell yourself in the job market and rely less on luck or a boss who likes you. Advancement becomes a consequence of effort and talent not luck or patronage. Good teachers as we are celebrating today make those good CVs possible.

It is often said that the best way to hide information from a black man is in a book, that must not be the fate of Akwa Ibom children in modern day Nigeria. It is a sad waste of talent in my mind, when we fail to give the teaching job the esteem it requires and allow qualified people to think becoming "Okada riders" makes more economic sense than taking up teaching in our public schools. It is equally of concern when we do not strive to encourage more of our children to seek

numeracy over literacy by encouraging them to take to the sciences and related professional courses as this award seeks to do.

The inconvenient truth is that today, we do have significant number of our people who are educated but unqualified for the new job opportunities of our new economy as we are largely science shy and take too easily to the road of the liberal subjects. As we seek to become a competitive player in the Nigerian landscape, our education must have a qualitative approach as an essential complement to the quantitative one which the current government's free education scheme offers. Our problem in public school education is sometimes not a problem of insufficient resource, it is a problem of insufficient resource allocation and our government must recognize that it has a stewardship obligation as any transformation must have a content dimension and this much is true of the upliftment it seeks in the educational sector.

Permit me to add my voice to the social dialogue that seeks to create a new Akwa Ibom State of results, as we have had promises in abundance for 8 years since 1999. It may be early days yet but one is encouraged that the current government seeks to achieve delivery over pronouncements at least as it relates to educational opportunity in our society through the free education programme it recently enacted.

We must seek to banish the painfully familiar stereotype, perception and profiling of Akwa Ibom people as Stewards/Cooks, "Okada riders" and other low self esteem job seekers and holders. We must resist the temptation in government to buy social peace by dolling

out handouts, benefits and donations in the name of **"empowerment"** as such is distortionary and a disincentive to creating a society of people with a spirit of **"can do"** and the experience of **"know how"**, **A "Do how"** Akwa Ibom populace. Government must see education as seeking to provide help and citizens to use that help to help themselves.

Inoyo Toro Foundation in instituting this Annual Awards represent a new set of social entrepreneurs in Akwa Ibom State, who believe that it is not the reach of a man's fame nor the depth of his fortune but his ability to make a difference to humanity is what matters. By their action they show that success of others in Akwa Ibom State does not diminish theirs but adds to the common wealth. I sincerely hope that their effort, serves as an appeal to other people of optimism and goodwill to join hands to build a coalition of the socially responsible and a network of peers with interest in public issues and public good in Akwa Ibom State.

"A single swallow does not make a summer" as the saying goes, equally "a single gunshot does not constitute a revolution", but my friends it can start one.

I see a tomorrow for Akwa Ibom State, which will be more glorious than today, sons happier than their fathers. We must however make the right choices, empower our people through education and celebrate our teachers.

In ending this I am reminded of Robert Frost in his poem **"The Road Not Taken"**, which you kindly permit me to recite.

Two Roads diverge in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be he one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth

Then took the other, as just as fair
And having perhaps the better claim
Because it was grassy and wanted wear,
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves as step had trodden black
Oh, I marked the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way
I doubted if I should ever come back

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence
Two roads diverged into a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference

Thank you all for listening, God bless our teachers,
and God bless Akwa Ibom State.

Larry E. Ettah
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28th November 2008.