Education Reform:

PRIVATE EDUCATION FOR THE POOR

Patrick O. Okigbo III
in conversation with
Dr. Modupe Adefeso-Olateju

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EDUCATION REFORMS:
Private Schools for the Poor

zoom

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Wed. Feb. 21, 2024
3:00PM – 4:30PM (WAT)

Patrick O. Okigbo III
Founding Partner,
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Host

Dr. Modupe (Mo) Adefeso-Olateju
Founder, The Education Partnership
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Speaker

Upcoming Sessions

Dr Salisu Mohammed Lukman
Former Vice Chairman (North), APC
Former DG, Progressive Governors Forum

Party Politics and Africa's Democratic Future
Mar. 06, 2024
3:00 – 4:30 (WAT)

Jude Chike Uzonwanne
Author, The First Trillion,
Board, MyMD Pharmaceuticals USA

THE TRILLION DOLLAR ECONOMY
Arbitrage and the Nigerian Dream
Mar. 20, 2024
3:00 – 4:30 (WAT)

EDUCATION REFORMS: PRIVATE SCHOOLS FOR THE POOR

Nigeria's public school system faces numerous challenges, including inadequate funding, infrastructural deficits, and a shortage of qualified personnel. These factors affect the quality of education and lead to poor learning outcomes.

Private schools, often perceived as catering only to the affluent, are pivotal in providing quality education to low-income families, even in the Global South. Contrary to common perception, low-cost private schools have effectively served people experiencing poverty, often delivering better educational outcomes than public schools.

Patrick O. Okigbo III, the Founding Partner at Nextier, used this Development Discourse session with Dr. Modupe Adefeso-Olateju, the Founder of the Education Partnership, to explore how low-cost private schools provide access, bridge outcome gaps, and contribute to universal education goals. This document provides an annotated transcript of the discussion. Click **here** to watch the discourse.

ANNOTATED TRANSCRIPT

EDUCATION REFORMS: PRIVATE SCHOOLS FOR THE POOR

Patrick O. Okigbo III, in conversation with **Dr. Modupe Adefeso-Olateju**
February 21, 2023

Video: https://youtu.be/TV8_Rk8Ir1E?si=UmQsnfJ-eICSWBlb

Patrick O. Okigbo III: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Development Discourse, where we ideate for Africa's development. My name is Patrick Okigbo III, Nextier's founding partner. Nextier is a multi-competency advisory firm focused on solving complex development challenges in the continent.

Our session today is on education reforms. We will probably start on a gloomy note as Nigeria's and Africa's education numbers are not great. However, we will land on some sunnier notes.

My guest today is a good friend and sister. She is one of Nigeria's foremost thinkers on education reform. Dr. Modupe Adefeso-Olateju is an education policy expert with hands-on experience designing and implementing education programmes across the continent. She has served on several ministerial technical working groups and Nigeria's Agenda 2050 for Education and Human Capital Development. Her firm, The Education Partnership, convenes Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Education's Annual Education Conference. She drafted a section of the 2011-2015 Ministerial Action Plan on Education and supported implementing and scaling up education programmes and capacity development in several African countries.

Modupe founded or led several impactful interventions in Africa's education sector in the last decade, such as Learn Nigeria and the Center for Education Innovations. She is on the Advisory Committee of the Brookings Institution's Center for Universal Education, the Malala Fund USA's Governance Board, Slums to School US, Human Capital Africa, and so many others. She earned her Master's degree with distinction from the University College, London and her Ph.D. in Education and International Development from the same university. Modupe, welcome.

Dr. Modupe Adefeso-Olateju: Thanks so much, Patrick, for your excellent introduction. As I always say, I want to be like you when I grow up.

Patrick: No! We are all trying to be like you, Mo. I keep wondering where you find time to do the natural things like sleep. Congratulations on your Brookings fellowship and your great work across the continent. If I am not mistaken, your organisation works in maybe about four or five countries across the continent.

Dr. Adefeso-Olateju: Thank you, Patrick.

Patrick: I was looking at your website and saw that its motto is solving complex challenges in the education sector. That seems to be an excellent place to start our conversation. So, in your view, what would you characterise as some of the most complex challenges we face in Africa's education sector?

Dr. Adefeso-Olateju: I think that is a great place to start because my ambition is to contribute to solving these complex challenges in the education sector. I think the first realisation is that education is not a sector. Education is a system, and education sits right in the middle of everything we call development. A few years ago, the Financial Times designed this lovely graphic. They took an image of Strategic Development Goal (SDG) 4 on quality education and situated it in the middle of the remaining 16 SDGs. The reason was that achieving quality education has a catalytic effect on the other SDGs. There is a multiplier effect of ensuring children have access to quality and relevant education. So, I think that is the crux of the complexity of the challenge.

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Are our education systems set up to ensure children have access to high-quality education (which they deserve, according to the human rights conventions)? Do they have access to relevant education? These questions speak to the currency of our times and the different zeitgeists that we have passed through, artificial intelligence being the current one.

> Education is a system, and it sits right at the middle of everything we call development.

Are we preparing children to participate fully in the world under construction? That is one of my headaches because the answer is no in many parts of Africa. No, we are not preparing children for an uncertain future. These are some of the biggest challenges in countries like ours.

In Nigeria, Pakistan, and other countries where I work, we have access to education problems. I do not mean access to quality education but access to schools. The number of out-of-school children in Nigeria – 18 to 24 million –should be worrisome because no child should be without formal education.

Another challenge is allowing children to be in a space where they can learn. This problem reminds me of one of the best definitions of education I have heard. This definition was from my Master's and PhD supervisor, Prof. Moses Oketch. He defines education as "an opportunity to have a chance at life." Education is not a guarantee, but it is an opportunity. It is a chance. It gives you that chance to say, I can be something. That is a benefit that every child deserves.

Patrick: I hear you on that. Education is one's license to play. This point becomes even more cogent in the coming reality captured in Mustafa Suleiman's The Coming Wave. Artificial Intelligence and advances in biotechnology will shape our future. People without access to education – and this is before we start discussing content and quality – may become lost in time, like the lost tribes in the Amazon.

> Education is … "an opportunity to have a chance in life."
> *– Prof. Moses Oketch*

Returning to something you touched on, the number of out-of-school children in Nigeria. I saw some data that says, I think one in five out of school children is a Nigerian. What factors led to this unfortunate situation?

Dr. Adefeso-Olateju: At the heart of it is the simple economic principle of demand and supply. Demand for education is far outstripping its supply. Supply, as used here, is the traditional sense of government provision of school buildings, teachers, teaching and learning materials. Nigeria is experiencing a significant supply shortfall. Similarly, with such high fertility rates, the government cannot accommodate many children.

On the part of parents and communities, there are also things that I would refer to as norms that preclude children from going to school. Some of these are religious or cultural norms. What is interesting in the research I have done with my colleagues at TEP Center is that many of these norms have socio-economic underpinnings. For example, these norms do not apply to wealthy people within the same cultural or religious construction. However, these norms apply to the poor, who adhere to those norms.

> For the poor, there is an opportunity cost to education, and it is survival.

Poverty is one of the main reasons parents do not send their children to school. This fact is because, most times, a mindset predisposes one to poverty. That said, parents are pragmatic. Whether they are wealthy or poor, they are pragmatic people. They are logical, and the average parent wants to create a better world – than they had access to – for their children. For many parents, this means that whilst they want to educate their children, their pragmatic needs affect those decisions. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs indicates that those further down the food chain may opt out of education while seeking what to eat. For the poor, there is an opportunity cost to education, and it is survival. So, the poor make pragmatic survival decisions that prevent them from ascending Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. These are logical choices. It doesn't mean parents do not want the best for their children. Sometimes, the parents make the best decisions they can to survive.

Patrick: Sure, and I'd like us to get into some of these norms. A great book I read recently, The Time-Travelling Economist: Why Education, Electricity and Fertility Are Key to Escaping Poverty by Charlie Robertson, traces high fertility rates to an inability to save and invest in enabling infrastructure. Charlie positions education as an effective contraceptive for a high fertility rate. However, in Nigeria, especially in the Muslim North, it is difficult to have such conversations, especially if they have to do with birth control. I once engaged with HRM Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, Emir of Kano, on his efforts to address some of these norms. For instance, the more conservative Muslims do not want male teachers educating their daughters, so they withhold them from schools. Yet, if today's girls are uneducated, there won't be female teachers to teach the next cohort. So, what are some of the other norms, cultural and religious? Let's just put them on the table and see if there is a way to address them.

Dr. Adefeso-Olateju: What you have shared just now is extremely important. It reminds me of a study conducted by a friend when we were at the Institute of Education. She titled it *Akin to my teacher*,[1] and she was looking at the effect of gender cast within the context of India on girl's attendance and, ultimately, performance in school. This point is vital as we consider whether girls can see themselves mirrored in the classroom and the protection of knowing that females are responsible for your children. There are different aspects to this. We talk about

[1] Rawal, S. and Kingdon, G., 2010. *Akin to my teacher: Does caste, religious or gender distance between student and teacher matter? Some evidence from India* (No. 10-18). Quantitative Social Science-UCL Social Research Institute, University College London.

toilet facilities, for example, and the importance of having separate toilet facilities for boys. We know about period poverty and how it is that girls who are pubescent or prepubescent require privacy that many public institutions are not able to provide. So, we keep them at home.

We also know about some of the religious biases that pertain to teaching children in a Western curriculum or one deemed to be so. I think the counterargument to that is that we do have Sharia schools in Nigeria. We have schools that combine a purely Islamic curriculum with a standard Nigerian primary school curriculum so that children can have the best of both worlds. We have parents who prefer to educate their children in Arabic. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that. There are many countries in the world where the national language is Arabic. However, as we think about socialising these children within the context of a country where the official language is English, these limitations deprive children of the opportunity to be full participants in the ecosystem and to reap the full benefits of this country's commonwealth.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs © *ThoughtCo*

There are many perspectives on the normative issues. However, taking those from a socio-economic foundation is problematic because that colours parents' decisions. One interesting example to remedy this challenge was a project we implemented a few years ago. We were part of this initiative that focused on helping parents in rural Northern Nigeria, particularly the fathers, appreciate the economic value of education. We conducted a study and realised that many fathers did not believe that schooling conferred as much economic value as marriage. To them, a girl was more economically viable as a married woman than an educated one. So, this project involved making a documentary about female role models. We took the documentary around rural Northern Nigeria. The viewers saw girls (who look just like the ones in their communities) rise from poverty through the power of education to become very influential. Showing the documentary to parents sparked something in them, and fathers began to say, "Oh, we didn't know that education could also give us economic returns." Again, these are price-sensitive parents. So, I think it's difficult to shake the socio-economic dimension from these norms.

Patrick O. Okigbo III: Fantastic. We can view some of the things you talked about as infrastructure-type challenges. Maybe increased funding could address the challenges with facilities, etc. Recent UNESCO and World Bank figures show that aid to education in sub-Saharan Africa plummeted by about 23 percent in the last recorded year. I couldn't access data to track how that has fared in Nigeria. However, Nigeria's education budget increased from 5.4 percent in 2022 to about 8.2 percent in 2023. That is huge and encouraging. Yet, we haven't seen that uptick in educational outcomes. So, besides the time lag argument – that when you invest, you need some time to see the results – is it fair to argue that increasing funding may not, on its own, deliver the results we are looking for? This point is especially compelling if we continue to apply those funds under the same delivery models we have used for the past half-century.

Dr. Adefeso-Olateju: There are challenges with our budgetary cycle. Note that the signed budget differs significantly from budgetary releases and utilisation. With each progressive

cycle, the pot shrinks a bit more, such that what is budgeted is not what is released or utilised. It is not what gets to the children.

There are several reasons for the shrinkage. Some of them are pragmatic because education is on the concurrent legislative list. So, the federal government and state governments can all adjudicate. Sometimes, there aren't enough resources to back the budget. It then becomes just a financial projection. Other times, there are deliberate intentional leakages, particularly within the contracting process.

A few years ago, the TEP centre interrogated this point. We examined the Universal Basic Education Commission expenditure. We investigated how those funds travelled from the national to the school level. We investigated the levels and stages of leakages and so on. However, the knowledge is not enough to increase the budget. We must think about our population growth rate and the system through which the money will flow. The authorities must back up the system with solid accountability metrics as well. Without those checks, we will continue to focus on what is more than just a financial plan, as opposed to what we need to solve problems.

> …With each progressive cycle, the pot shrinks a bit more such that what is budgeted is not what is utilised.

Patrick O. Okigbo III: By the way, I saw your report on the flow of funds through the system. Brilliant work. So, you have put it out there. We know where the leakages are. Why aren't we able to plug them? And I know that's almost a stupid question to ask from someone like me, but why aren't we able to plug the leakages? I am leading up to another question: If we are unable, if we have shown over time that we are unable to run these things through a public system, shouldn't we look for another model that brings more accountability, transparency, and efficiency to the system?

Dr Adefeso-Olateju: No, because in the final analysis, one might argue that we don't see the bang for the buck simply because we don't have sufficient political will. And, of course, there are many layers to this point. There is the dimension of political skill: Do our political and policy leaders know how to solve the challenge? Do they know how to make money count? Have we interrogated how the money flows, where it flows to, and who it flows through? So, we need to strengthen our political will to ensure that the allocations we budget for education make a difference. In most countries, there is clarity around the government's responsibility for providing public and social services, one of the most important of which is education. Most countries have raised their hands to say that we take responsibility for ensuring that our children have access to basic education, defined as the first six, seven or nine years, depending on the country. In Nigeria, it is the first ten years: one year of pre-primary education, six years of primary education, and three years of junior secondary education. So, we put our hands up to say, as a government, we will guarantee that all children can access ten years of quality and relevant education, and they have unfettered access.

Different arguments exist about government efficiency and what we should hold the government accountable for. There is the pragmatic John Dewey-type analysis of whether we should allow children to be while waiting for the government to fix itself. I know we will talk more about this issue as we continue the conversation. However, laying it on the table and

seeking a reasonable midpoint around the idea of partnerships is important. We must interrogate the challenges in Nigeria's public sector and where the opportunities might lie in the private sector. However, the one thing that I am clear on is that governments have put their hands up to provide education to children, and we should not let them off the hook. It is crucial to hold the government accountable. But at the same time, how can we open our eyes and see children either not having access to school or having access to school, and we know without a shadow of a doubt that they are wasting their time in those buildings? How can we, in good conscience, allow that to happen? This point is the ethical dilemma.

Patrick O. Okigbo III: Let us talk briefly about what it means that the government raised its hands and said we would take responsibility. What does taking responsibility mean? Does it mean the government will set the framework that enables children to access quality education? Or that the government would fund everything to ensure children receive quality education in the first ten years. We should establish such clarity before we get deeper into the conversation.

Dr Adefeso-Olateju: Yeah, I think we should lay that crucial foundation. So, let's assume that I am setting up a soup kitchen in Lagos and inviting others to cook and distribute the food. The question I would pose to anyone is, am I providing food to the poor? Your answer would be, of course, yes, Mo, you are. But am I? Am I there in those rural communities? Am I cooking the food? Am I dishing the food out? Am I taking it to people in those communities? I am not doing that personally. But am I providing? Yes. I am.

This analogy speaks to the principal-agent theory. It is the idea that you can deliver public service without doing it yourself. The government can put the parameters, legislation, policy, standards, and accountability framework that guarantees children access to quality education without constructing more schools within the convoluted contractual processes associated with the government bureaucracy. Implementing such a framework should be the government's responsibility. However, sometimes, we conflate the idea of providing education with the idea of building and running the schools ourselves. This point is what we need to unpack as a society.

Patrick O. Okigbo III: Okay, so if the government's role is to ensure that soup gets to the people, it doesn't necessarily have to be the guy stirring the bowl, right? It doesn't necessarily have to be the guy dishing it out. The government's goal and role should be to ensure the people get the soup. Now, if you layer on top of this the fact that, for decades, Nigeria has consistently delivered terrible educational outcomes, then we may need to rethink the model. Pick whatever measure you want to use, PISA or whatever, and you will see how much Nigeria has underperformed. Take a look at UNESCO numbers. Africa needs about $77 billion annually to reach its education targets for 100 million more students by 2030. This amount covers about 80 percent of the global funding gap in education, and we also know that no dollar-laden chariots are heading our way. So, where must we go to unlock the funding? Shouldn't we be looking at more private sector participation, and if so, what models should we look at?

Dr Adefeso-Olateju: Thank you, Patrick, for asking me this PhD level question. I appreciate it. So, let's start with some numbers. I want to lay the ground, not for increased private sector participation, but for recognising that the private sector is already participating.

Some colleagues and I conducted research in three states in Northern Nigeria. These three states have 94 local government areas (LGAs), but we only went to 24 LGAs. We sampled what we refer to as non-state schools – those that do not have government approval to operate as schools. Of course, as you can imagine, they are very diverse, including religious institutions, whether Muslim or Christian. You have schools set up by private proprietors. You have schools set up by charitable institutions that are not religious. You have purely religious institutions that refer to themselves as schools. So, there is vast diversity.

We collected data from a relatively small sample of schools in those 24 LGAs. We found 231,555 children in those schools considered unregistered and, therefore, don't show up in government records. When the government wants to determine the number of schools and children it has, it typically carries out the annual school census. All states are statutorily responsible for conducting a school census every year. Researchers base many education sector surveys in schools. So, when you do not find children in government or government-approved schools, the conclusion is that those children are out of school, especially when they are at the age when they should be in school. In one swoop, we found 231,555 children the government could easily include in the statistics of children in school but were not because we don't recognise the non-state schools. I am not advocating for every single one of the 3,000+ schools we visited. However, some of these schools deliver on the curriculum. Many of them can deliver effectively on a curriculum. However, we are not giving them a chance at all.

One of the very few states in Nigeria that have put their hand up to begin truly interrogating this notion of private sector participation in schooling is Lagos State. In 2008, with the support of the UK government, Lagos State conducted a proper census of all the privately registered and unregistered schools. They found 12,098 private schools in comparison to about 1,500 plus public schools. If you included children at the early childhood level, the private sector accounted for about 75 percent of enrolments in Lagos state alone. That realisation birthed many initiatives, including DEEPEN (Developing Effective Private Education in Nigeria) programme that aimed to strengthen the market for low-fee private schools.

Shouldn't we strengthen the market so that the bad schools die off naturally, the ones that are okay will improve, and the great ones will have more patronage? So, even before we advocate for greater private sector involvement, we must come away from our ideological beliefs around who should provide education and recognise that the non-state sector is already plugging a gap. With more recognition, support, and regulation, they could help us address this massive out-of-school challenge in the country.

Patrick O. Okigbo III: Exactly. I don't know if it is in your reports, or maybe it is in Tooley and Dixon,[2] but I saw that about 75 percent of the schools in Lagos are non-state schools. So, they are already there. One of the assumptions about low-fee private schools held by most people, not just Nigerians, is that private schools are for the rich and not the poor. What are some of the arguments for private schools over government schools?

[2] Tooley, J. and Dixon, P., 2006. 'De facto'privatisation of education and the poor: implications of a study from sub-Saharan Africa and India. Compare, 36(4), pp.443-462.

Dr Adefeso-Olateju: You are now speaking to my PhD thesis. However, before discussing arguments for or against private vs. public schools, it is important to interrogate why we continue to have this chasm between those advocating for each position.

Private schools for the poor seem like an anomaly because public primary and secondary schools are tuition-free, even though they have other associated costs. Why would anyone use a private school that charges tuition? The assumption is that such patrons must be wealthy, but this is not the reality. The reality is that there are some hard costs associated with utilising schools that already exist in the public sector, such as PTA, uniforms, books, etc. Other costs pertain to the quality of education, the attentiveness of teachers and, in some contexts, the willingness of the school to adapt to the needs of the learner and the perception of care, particularly for younger children. Parents weigh these costs and decide what's best for their wards.

Earlier in my career, about 14 years ago, I spent a lot of time researching low-fee private schools, which I found fascinating. Parents were voting with their feet (away from "free" public schools to fee-paying private schools). Sometimes, they spend more than 50 percent of their household income on their children's education. They pay for a low-fee private school because they would say things like One, the teachers would be there. Two, the class sizes are small, so my children will have attention. Three, they genuinely care about my children because when they are not in school, they would call that day and ask, what happened? Why is this child not in school? Also, they see the head teacher as a visible instructional leader who supports the teachers, fosters accountability, and leads. While the schools may be ragged on the outside, they have something that appeals to rational parents. These are the advantages of the private schools.[3]

> These schools might be ragged on the outside, but parents see something that makes them gravitate towards them.

When I conducted my regression analysis, I visited three different states nationwide. I had a sample of, I can't remember, I think, over 54 schools. I sampled more than 1,200 children. I found that private schools conferred learning benefits to the children. These "private school" children were doing significantly better in terms of their learning outcomes as measured, you know, by math and literacy tests. However, when I introduced more controls into these models, I found that that effect grew smaller because we had to separate apples and pears first. We needed to ensure that the schools and children I was comparing were comparable. I will give you a typical scenario. You have private schools for the wealthy and the elite in Nigeria. In those schools, many of the children demonstrated higher learning outcomes. We went to their homes and discovered that these children had lesson teachers. They had computers. They had electricity, and their parents were motivated. We attributed the learning outcomes to the school, but it was not the school. It was the parents at home and the facilities. It is

> ... we must examine our ideological beliefs around who should provide education and recognise that the non-state sector is already plugging a gap. With more recognition, support, and regulation, they could help us address this massive out-of-school challenge in the country.

[3] For more arguments, see: Tooley, J. (2007), *Educating Amaretch: Private Schools for the Poor and the New Frontier for Investors*. Available at: https://ideas.repec.org/a/bla/ecaffa/v27y2007i2p37-43.html

the fact that they are wealthy. It is the fact that they are motivated. So, we needed to ensure we were not conflating issues in these models.

And what did I find? With my most rigorous model, I discovered that it was all tied to leadership and accountability. The effect we saw of private schools conferring learning outcome benefits to children is that they are accountable to parents and school leaders. It is because the leaders show up. It is because the leaders have the authority to discipline the teachers.

Is this replicable in the public sector? We found that in the public sector, the teachers and the head teachers are accountable to the government. They both have the same paymaster. So, how can the head teacher discipline an erring teacher? And I don't mean in any punitive way, but to ensure that they adhere to the rules and regulations set out in the policy and the curriculum. These differences are the arguments for private schooling.

> The effect we saw of private schools conferring learning outcome benefits to children is because those schools are accountable to parents and to the school leaders. It is because the leaders show up.

However, there are also arguments for public schooling. Which private school chain can reach as many children as the government ones? Which school chain can recruit as many teachers as the government? So, there are advantages that we can associate with each sector, and I think the sweet spot is when we bring both systems together.

Patrick O. Okigbo III: You laid out a strong case for private schools for the poor, but there are some arguments against it. Antagonists claim the proprietors, as capitalists, may recruit low-quality teachers to ensure a higher financial return. Is there any validity to that argument? The second argument is that Nigeria needs its public school system to teach ethics, create a shared national culture, and raise people who see themselves as Nigerians. Another argument against private schools is that they engage in malpractices related to checkpoint examinations like First School Living Certificate, GCE, WAEC, etc. These are called "special centres." Are these enough arguments against a more aggressive push towards private schools for the poor?

Dr Adefeso-Olateju: I will speak to three points. First, quality. When recruiting teachers, do private school entrepreneurs deliberately go for the bottom of the rung? Unfortunately, many times, teachers in Nigeria are already at that level.

I will give you a personal example. When I got my first degree in Education from the University of Lagos, many people were shocked that I chose that course of study even with my great JAMB result.[4] No one thought that I genuinely wanted to teach or that I truly wanted to study education. Most people believe that only people who can't get in for better courses opt to study Education. So, teachers are already at a disadvantage.

Education, as a sector, is already discriminated against. Within the scope of this discrimination, we have tiers of teachers. As of 2024, a teacher's required qualification is the National Certificate of Education (NCE). This certificate is like the Ordinary National Diploma (OND), a two-year programme. In addition, if you want to study education in a tertiary institution like a

[4] The Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) organises the entrance examination into tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

university, the cut-off marks that enable your entry are systematically the lowest. The same is true for national education colleges. The country is signalling that education is unimportant. We don't want the best teachers. We want the worst performers to come into the teaching profession.

Now, of course, many teachers have risen above this situation. Many teachers are excellent. I have been in private and public classrooms where I see teachers just forging ahead and doing what they need to do. So, do these private school entrepreneurs deliberately look for the lowest quality teachers? It is a matter of demand and supply. I have been in a classroom where the parents told me that the school fees range between ₦1,000 ($0.66) to ₦3,000 ($2.00) per term. Which teacher do you want to recruit when the children pay ₦1,500 ($1.00) per term? So yes, some proprietors recruit secondary school leavers as teachers.

There is a lot of pragmatism around this action. The private school entrepreneurs are not Shylocks trying to fleece every naira that they can from the parents. Do not forget that this category includes several faith-based and non-profit schools. An important example is how initiatives like Teach for Nigeria show us that you can find high-quality young people and deploy them into the public and low-fee private sectors. I think they have had a bit of a challenge with the public sector because it is not well-established to absorb these young people, particularly at the end of their tenure. So, you can have high-quality teachers serving children from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is all about the willingness of our policymakers to adopt these practices wholeheartedly.

The country is signalling that education is unimportant. We don't want the best teachers. We want the worst performers to come into the teaching profession.

Regarding curriculum, honestly, Patrick, I think that is not an issue. I have never been in a low-fee private school where the curriculum was not Nigerian. They can't afford to teach anything except the Nigerian curriculum. Now, that is different for the private schools for the elite. Most, if not all, low-fee private schools would use the Nigerian curriculum because that is the most accessible. Also, the teachers employed at these schools are trained based on the Nigerian curriculum and their teacher training institutions.

Finally, for children who sort of shift from public to private schools to go into these "special centres," again, this is a regulatory problem. In one of the states we serve in northern Nigeria, we chatted with the quality assurance officer about some of their challenges. They told us they had just one bus for monitoring and inspection, just one bus to take the quality assurance officers around. Do you know how many schools are in that state? There is a capacity issue, so it all comes back to the will to do the right thing. As a government, do we have the political will to prioritise our children's access to high-quality education in public or private schools? Are we serious about creating opportunities for them to be competitive and fulfil our aspirations for our society?

Patrick O. Okigbo III: Okay, let me test some arguments with you. The first one is funding. Some low-fee private schools charge about $2 monthly, about ₦100 daily. One of the reasons they can charge that low is that they recruit their teachers from the communities where they operate. The teachers can cope because they do not spend on transportation and other

expenses associated with living in expensive cities. The monthly salaries may appear low, but they can get by within the context of their community. They are not wealthy by any stretch of the imagination but will survive.

The second point is on inspection or supervision. The government requires a cadre of inspectors with public schools to ensure the teachers show up, do their jobs, etc. However, you probably do not need such an inspection with private schools because the parents are focused on outcomes. They compare notes. When kids in School A can speak better English and solve better Maths than those in School B, the parents vote with their feet. The parents move their children to a different school when the teachers fail to show up in class or to put in the required dedication. So, hasn't private involvement solved many of the challenges the inspectors are supposed to address in public schools? I hope you say yes, and if so, shouldn't we move some of the government spending on public schools into the hands of the parents so they can vote where they want to take their kids?

Dr Adefeso-Olateju: You have raised fascinating points worthy of interrogation. Yes, we do have the retail approach to school fee payment because the target market for these schools is the catchment area, which comprises people who live on a daily wage, like farmers, fish farmers, and petty traders. It is essential to have teachers who come from and reside in those communities.

That is how our parents went to school. Their teachers were community teachers. They all lived in the community. So, you would see the teacher in school, and when school closes, everyone goes home together to the village. The teacher would have multiple roles in the community. The teacher is also the storyteller in the evening and may also be the community's accountant. I am speaking of mainly rural areas now. So, there is something powerful about having teachers domiciled in communities.

Another question is whether it is practical nationwide because we have urban and rural areas. Then we have communities in conflict or crisis where the notion of community is totally out the window. We have children who have lived in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps for seven years. They don't know any other home, and that's Nigeria's current reality. So, I think the retail approach is helpful, but can it solve the entire challenge of the education sector? Maybe not, because the education sector is very diverse, and it's very complicated as well.

There are always counterarguments about why we should even go to a retail approach when there are public schools that children can access. We can go into many discussions about the quality of public schools and teachers showing up in the public schools. One point to lay on the table is that schools have a responsibility to help children maximise their capacity, to help families and communities cohere better, and to advance the nation's goals.

This point takes me to the second question, which is maybe not inspection but what we refer to now as quality assurance. Quality assurance officers go to schools not just to see whether teachers are teaching but to ensure adherence to the broader purpose of education. They interrogate the curriculum as some schools can become effective radicalisation centres if not regulated. At the same time, it is essential to focus on the context. We need to know that the children are safe in schools. Some parents have told me that high-quality schools enforce

corporal punishment. How hard teachers can hit children is the measure of quality for them. So quality assurance officers need to come into these schools to ensure that the measures the parents are referring to as quality, which is abuse, are not perpetuated. So, I think there are many needs for quality assurance officers.

Lagos State is implementing an innovative model – the Graded Assessment System – where schools aspire to achieve the stipulated regulatory levels without fear of punishment. Pioneered in Lagos State, I believe Jigawa State and a few others have adopted it or are considering it now. The idea is that the school needs to upgrade to a certain point to be government-approved. However, since schools are currently low performers, the government should commend them when they improve and not punish them for failing to attain the set standard. The government incentivises schools to improve.

The grading system aims to enable private schools to aspire to deeper levels of effectiveness and efficiency. The system ties their performance to financial resourcing. For instance, it signals to banks that the school is ready for a loan, even though it is not a government-approved entity. However, because it is making traction and moving up the ladder, it is prepared to receive a loan to help it progress. A few states are currently deploying this system. This mechanism by which we can begin to bridge the gap between public and non-state schools. I would say that more resourcing is required. However, at the same time, we must think about not punitive but supportive regulation.

So, should we put more money into the hands of parents to choose the schools that are best for their children? On paper, yes, we can. However, we need to be clear about the contextual realities surrounding this kind of system, which you can refer to as a voucher system. We need to, for example, be able to estimate the per-pupil cost.

Patrick O. Okigbo III: How would you define the voucher system, and what are the arguments for and against it?

Dr Adefeso-Olateju: In the broadest sense, the voucher is a mechanism, a tool, sometimes just paper, that confers on parents the opportunity to choose the kind of education they want for their children. You can have a voucher that allows parents to move their children to their choice of public school. You can have a cross-voucher that enables movement from public to private schools. The government can use targeted vouchers. For example, you can use the voucher to target objectives such as increasing girls' enrolment in a particular community. A school can receive more resources if it can attract more girls than boys. There are many different facets and dimensions to vouchers and targeted vouchers.

The advantage of the voucher system is that it puts the power in the hands of those demanding the service. Right now, in public schools, the power isn't necessarily devolved to the parents who seek education for their children. It's a supply-side driven mechanism where governments provide the schools, and the teachers and parents have no choice. They must send their children to government schools because they don't have money to go elsewhere.

However, if you are unable to estimate the cost of educating a child per term and year and also if you are unable to calculate what the detrimental effect might be of withdrawing funds,

maybe from one type of school to another kind of school, then the voucher system becomes a little bit risky. It becomes a bit of a risky venture because, with education, whether there are 15 or 50 children, you must have a teacher in the class. Nigeria has several overpopulated classrooms, with some cases of over 100 children to one teacher. So, we must consider when the government must close a classroom because of a decline in demand for the teacher's services as pupils depart the public schools. It is, therefore, essential to estimate the effect of the loss of revenue on a school.

However, the government should support any programmes that put the power in the parents' hands. Maybe the government can implement a pilot model to see how it works. I know that some people are experimenting with this idea on a small scale and might want to share their experiences. However, we should consider solutions that put the power in the parents' hands. We align on that point.

Patrick O. Okigbo III: We should agree that Nigeria has enough people to model how much the state spends on educating a child. We can divide that figure by the number of school-age children in the states and issue that figure as vouchers to the parents. Now, the parents can use their vouchers to continue in the public school closest to them, or they may choose to use the voucher to go to a low-fee private school for the poor. The question, therefore, is what happens to the public schools if they don't get enough vouchers or if they don't get enough students? Shouldn't we allow them to fail and die a natural death, and the teachers and the head teachers in the school who couldn't create a school attractive to the parents would lose their jobs and go home? Isn't that enough incentive to get the head teacher, the teachers, and everyone to work hard to ensure their school continues to be a going concern?

Dr Adefeso-Olateju: I think that would hold water, but the one snafu is that in Nigeria, in most states, public primary and basic education are tuition-free. So, it is a lose-lose scenario for the public sector. If you put money into the hands of parents and they opt out of the public sector, the latter doesn't reap any benefit. The risks are high for the public sector. The costs are also high for the government because it's as if you are technically defunding the public school to fund the private school next door. Many states have scrapped tuition in public schools, although other costs are still associated with attending such schools. So, what are we vouchering exactly?

Patrick O. Okigbo III: We are vouchering what it still costs the states today to maintain those institutions. The state still pays salaries. In some cases where they do, they provide school uniforms, books, and materials. So that's the cost that the state bears. And what is in it for the state? It's the educational outcomes. For instance, if a typical state spends about ₦10 billion on its schools but realises minimal educational outcomes, it has lost. However, it wins when it divides the same ₦10 billion into vouchers, some of which will go to the low-fee private schools. The latter delivers better-educated citizens. Let's not dwell too much on how the government would have to negotiate with the labour unions. Isn't that increase in educational outcomes a win-win for the state and the families?

Dr Adefeso-Olateju: Yes, however, this is the challenge. How do you handle the labour unions? We are talking to a politician relying on those funds and mass support to win votes. It is difficult to make that argument as an either-or, and that is why I think the idea of public-

private partnerships even trumps that of the voucher because with the public-private partnership, what you do is you take the strengths of the public sector and merge it with the strength of the private sector.

Some countries have experimented with charter schools that create choices for parents. The government enables a different management style for these schools. Evidence shows that school management, leadership, and accountability make a difference. If that is the issue, shouldn't we begin to rethink school management?

Let's go back to the principal-agent theory. Governments have invited people to take over and manage their public schools. However, the government will continue to fund the schools at the 30,000-foot level. However, everything has to do with decisions about recruitment and compensation of teachers, how to attract children, teaching and learning decisions, and instructional leadership. The government cedes these decisions to accountable agents. We keep saying accountability, but how can the government fulfil its bargain if there is no quality assurance boss in a state?

Patrick O. Okigbo III: Let's switch to some audience questions. Can we upgrade Chris Ogunkoya to a panellist? There's a question she has that I think she should shed some more light on. While we are doing that, we have another question. It goes, "All schools, in my view, need to be inspected and regulated. These children spend many of their days in school. Aside from the learning outcomes, safety and safeguarding are critical factors in children's development. How do we ensure that teachers do not abuse children? How are school complaints managed?" That's the first question.

Dr Adefeso-Olateju: I think he is just echoing what I have said. It feels like a rhetorical question because the school is a site for developing different competencies and affinities. So, within the context of the school, we want children to become responsible citizens. We want them to become citizens who love other ethnic groups. We want them to be tolerant. We want them to appreciate climate issues and nature, to value nature, and to take care of it. We want them to learn how to work together, collaborate, and cooperate. However, we also want them to develop academic competencies. So many responsibilities are placed within this little box called the school, and parents have a share of the responsibility for ensuring that the school delivers. The government and society are also responsible for ensuring that the outcomes, regardless of how we measure them, are delivered.

Patrick O. Okigbo III: Chris, you had a second question. "Is it more favourable to use privately accessible schools instead of private schools for the poor?" Can you highlight the difference between privately accessible and private schools for the poor?

Christine Ogunkoye: Thank you so much for putting up this webinar. I have attended one of your programmes before. I am speaking from the premise of being a community specialist nurse and an educator. I work across various demographics, people who are struggling basically to do the best for their children and their families. How we use words is essential because nobody decides to be poor or to remain poor, and I think language is fundamental in describing some of the circumstances. We can be more creative in our language use.

I came to Nigeria a few years ago and observed a setting across the house where I was staying in Surulere. You would never have considered this place suitable for educating children. It was a dirty environment. And there was this young girl who led the learning. She was young, but she covered the curriculum in a way that I would typically deliver a properly structured learning plan. Her focus was physical education. She made those children so physically active that they became interactive and creative. She introduced literacy, mathematical thinking, and problem-solving in that small, dirty environment. To me, that was learning. That is what is available to them. That is what those children could access. The teacher did a fantastic job.

Patrick O. Okigbo III: Thank you for that contribution. Mo, can you talk about language and what it means in what we are trying to do? How have you reflected that point in your study?

Dr Adefeso-Olateju: Thank you, Chris. Your question took me back to about 13 years ago when I studied low-fee private schools. In one of the schools I visited, children were learning in one corner while there was an abattoir in another corner and a religious house in another, all in the same building. A deliverance session was going on while school was ongoing, and these children managed to learn something with all of this.

> Teachers are important, and I would put my money behind any system that can get us the best teachers.

What I heard from what you said was that teachers are essential. I would put my money behind any system that can get us the best teachers. We often find that the teacher characteristics most closely aligned with robust learning outcomes are not the easiest to measure. We typically measure years of schooling, teachers' degrees or certifications, and years of experience. These are important if the teacher already has some underlying characteristics, such as a genuine love for the children, commitment to their success, high aspirations, and high expectations from the children. This result is known as the Pygmalion effect. Is the teacher a lifelong learner and open to continuing learning? It is challenging to put indicators around these characteristics. However, I know that some people are trying to create these measures. We should invest in and promote whatever system can deliver the most effective teacher, whether it is a voucher system, PPP, pure-play public or private school.

Patrick O. Okigbo III: Nigeria has done this experiment on government schools for at least seven decades. We have put money into private and public schools. We have tried to motivate the teachers. We've tried to do all this stuff. They haven't entirely worked. Let's look at it. I know it's not a good comparison, but when we had NITEL,[5] we tried to motivate the staff. We tried to get them to do X, Y, and Z, but they couldn't. We privatised, but it didn't quite work. Then, we brought in private competition. MTN, Airtel, et cetera. They could deliver millions of lines, whereas NITEL delivered only 450,000 lines. Take that to every other sector. Whenever the government tries to do this public good, many factors make it difficult for the government to deliver. So, shouldn't we increasingly be thinking of models that actively enable private participation? If you talk to many low-fee private schools, they will complain about lack of access to funding. You touched on it with the school's ability to access bank loans. Why put them through that trouble when we can divide up the money that the government is wasting

[5] Nigerian Telecommunications Limited (NITEL) was Nigeria's national carrier until it was privatized in the early 2000s.

today on public schools and put it in people's hands? They can make the best decisions for their children. Parents should spend money on schools that deliver better educational outcomes. Those schools are more than likely private ones. By so doing, you solve the funding challenge for private schools, the problem of teacher motivation in public schools, etc. The more money the proprietors make, the more they can recruit top talents as teachers. Shouldn't we actively be pushing these types of ideas?

Dr Adefeso-Olateju: Of course, the context is a little different. So, telecommunications is different from education. One is about choice. Using mobile phones is a choice. Educating a child is not optional. That puts the responsibility, even according to the Convention on Human Rights, on the governments as they are responsible for developing citizenship, values, ethics, etc. However, parents also have the right to determine the education they want for their children. So, education sits between both public and private responsibilities. So, that is one fundamental difference.

The second is that, in my experience, I won't problematise the teacher; instead, I will focus on the system that throws up such teachers. The challenge is when you have a system that consistently signals that we want the lowest performers to enter the education system. Furthermore, we do not even emphasise continuous professional development. We will not put them into community practice, which research has proven to be one of the most effective ways teachers learn. This is the challenge. During the pandemic, Lagos State, the Ministry of Education, under the leadership of Mrs. Folashade Adefisayo, demonstrated incredible learning outcomes in its learners. I had a front-row seat to observe what the state did differently during that terrible emergency. What did Lagos do differently? One is leadership. Committed leadership. Mrs Adefisayo was an instructional leader who had become the State's Commissioner for Education. She was in the trenches daily. Today, she is on a boat to Badagry to see how the children are doing. The next day, she is going into a rural community. The next day, she goes to an inner-city school to see the on-ground reality. This is the same thing I saw in my regression model. Even though I was comparing private and public schools, the characteristics were the same.

The second thing that I observed was innovation. Committed leadership will innovate. It will break barriers to innovation. So, the question was, how will children learn at this time when teachers cannot be physically in the classroom? First, let us experiment with radio schooling. Two, let us progress from that into internet schooling. Third, let us go into zero-data internet schooling. Fourth, let us provide learning packets for the children. Five, let us go to Microsoft and all the big players and ask them to provide us with training for our teachers so that they can begin to use Google Classroom. Sixth, let us deepen WhatsApp schools because everybody uses WhatsApp. So, let us set up WhatsApp schools. Let us mark scripts on WhatsApp. That is what a leader does. Leaders can be found in the public or private sectors if you want to find them. It all boils down to the will.

The other thing I want to say is that one of the most challenging battles I have ever fought and still fight is the battle with ideology. How do you shake a person's belief if that is what they are invested in? For instance, there is an ideological belief that children of the poor should not be using private schools. I have been to a school where the head teacher told me to look at my hand. She put up her hand and said, look at my hand; are the fingers equal? I said no. She then

asked, why do you want all children to access this good quality education you refer to? God created us all differently. So, we first need to investigate these fundamental issues and then use them as the drivers for the solutions we put forward. So, it might be that we end up with a voucher system, and it becomes the most effective model that we can use to ensure that children are accessing quality education. We might end up with another model, but first, we must analyse these issues and, as I always say, put the child first. What do we refer to when we say we put the child first? Both the private and public sectors must come to an alignment of what it truly means to be child-centred.

Patrick O. Okigbo III: Several Nigerian political leaders posit that free education is the only way to provide effective education for the masses. I know that many of our public schools are already free. They are tuition-free, but the kids still pay for school uniforms. In your study and research, how effective has this free education been in Nigeria and across the continent? Should we continue down that path or think of something different?

Dr Adefeso-Olateju: The narrative is shifting even from free to affordable because we are finding that the costs associated with schooling are not just merely tuition costs. One of the barriers to children accessing school is the fact that there are other costs that they must bear. So, they must buy school uniforms, pay a levy here and another there, pay transportation costs, and pay many different costs, not just tuition. So, I think that free tuition is a way by which governments signal that they are equitable, particularly for everyone, because the provider is the government, which is the provider of last resort. But I am afraid to say we have observed a lot of hypocrisy. For instance, while there might be no tuition, who pays for the other costs? Can children access one meal a day in school? They need food if they will be in school from 8:00 a.m. to 1:00 or 2:00 p.m. If they were at home or with their parents in the markets selling wares, would they have had something to eat in those hours? So, we should not expect poor children to attend school if we can't take care of at least one meal daily. The children will be hungry and will skip school.

Also, we should conduct means tests. While some states conduct these tests, you can't means-test if you don't have good data. However, I still firmly believe that pupils should not be charged for basic education because the government has put up its hands to support public education. This position is because education is a human right. So, regardless of how you define basic education in your country's context, it is a fundamental human right, like the right to live, exist, and speak. It is a right. So, no one should be charged for it.

Within the context of older children, as we go higher up the educational ladder and move into tertiary education and post-secondary education, governments in Nigeria still want to provide tuition-free or heavily subsidised education. It is not going to work. It is not affordable. They should think about innovative ways to ensure people can access education through bursaries, scholarships, or loans. There are almost no tertiary or post-secondary institutions around the world that can survive without charging something. However, the critical question is, who are you charging? You can charge the direct beneficiaries, or you can charge somebody else to pay for the beneficiary. I believe that.

Most people in Nigeria use public schools because they simply can't afford the private ones, particularly as the latter are of better quality. Such people should not be charged because

their inability to leave the system signals something about their socio-economic capability. Those who leave the public system to try the private ones must pay for it. The conversation should be about making private schools more affordable for such people.

Affordability should be about the proportion of their household income that goes towards providing quality education for their children. The government cannot take its foot off any of these pedals. We can't leave such families to tend for themselves simply because they opted for private schools to give their children a better chance. It is the government's responsibility to ensure that all children, without exception, regardless of the type of school they access, can afford to be in school, whether it's a tuition-free education or one that their families can afford.

Patrick O. Okigbo III: Let me reiterate that when you say it is the government's responsibility to provide the soup, it doesn't mean they must stir the pot; instead, it is that they should ensure the people get the soup.

Final question. Your organisation, The Education Partnership, receives quite some support from the MacArthur Foundation, Gates Foundation, etc., to do impact assessments. So, you generate data on the educational system. To what extent does this insight shape the government's policy designs, programme design, implementation, etc.? I am thinking about supply and demand. How much demand are you getting from the people who should desire to use the data, and if not, why aren't they demanding it? And how can we turn that around? If evidence does not shape our thinking, we may lose much more to incompetence than corruption. What's driving the demand (or not), and how can we fix it?

> Our greatest success with evidence-based policymaking has been a participatory approach to evidence collection.

Dr Adefeso-Olateju: Patrick, I think that is a great question. Our greatest success with evidence-based policymaking has been a participatory approach to evidence collection. So, sensitising the policymakers concerning the actual situation, involving them in the process, even involving them in the process of collecting the data, has been our greatest success in moving the needle and has probably been our sphere of greatest success. We have come to recognise that carrying out a study and simply going to the government, regardless of the department in government or the ministry or the agency and saying to them, look, we have wonderful data, use it. That is not going to work. In the science of systematic scaling, we refer to that as saying to somebody, oh, look, I have a wonderful child that I wanted to have. I am bringing that child to you to adopt. Why would you adopt my child? For what reason? So, I think participatory research design, participatory empirical work, even collecting the data, and participatory data analysis have been our greatest success.

However, I want to draw attention to three distinct levels here. One is the production of evidence because we talk about evidence-based policymaking. So, one is the production of evidence. The second is policymaking itself. Both you and I have participated extensively in designing and drafting policy. And the third is policy implementation.

I'd like to say there are three distinct stages, which ideally should be cyclical. Evidence should inform policymaking. Then, the appropriate team should implement the policy. From the

implementation, we should learn new things that result in more evidence that informs policy. Then, the cycle continues. Very often, there is a disconnect between the impetus to design or structure a policy and the will to deliver and implement that policy. For instance, several years ago – and I think this example is jarring – there was an interest in including additional trade subjects in the curriculum. However, the authorities failed to develop the curriculum framework for those trade subjects taught at senior secondary schools. The Teachers Training Colleges did not train the faculty who should deliver the new curricula, like photography. So, it was an interesting policy to include additional subjects to prepare young people for vocations and maybe even prepare them for entrepreneurship; however, these policies were dead on arrival simply because we had not thought them through. We had not strategically considered the actions to ensure the policy succeeded. So, I think the evidence is one thing, and the policy is another, but that policy implementation is where the death knell is sounded.

Patrick O. Okigbo III: Mo, permit me to invite you to give your final thoughts. Today, we set out to talk about Education Reforms: Low-Cost Private Schools for the poor. In maybe 30 seconds, what is your final summation on that topic?

Dr Adefeso-Olateju: In the final analysis, we must shake ourselves off our ideological underpinnings. The world is moving very fast, and the sooner we – when I say we, I mean the government and the non-state sector –the sooner we begin to focus on what is truly important for the next generation, the closer we will be to surviving what is going to come at us and what is coming at us very soon. So, I think it's a charge, a call to action for us to link hands together and have these kinds of candid conversations.

Patrick, please invite me next time. Bring a senior policymaker as well. Let's have this honest conversation amongst ourselves. Let's come to a shared understanding of what's vital for us to focus on. Let's shake the dichotomies between government and private schools. The pupils are our children. If you are the Minister or Commissioner for Education, every child within your jurisdiction, whether public, private or out of school, is your child. You should treat them as you would your biological children. So, I will end on this maternal note because we need to put some heart into these conversations.

Patrick O. Okigbo III: Dr. Modupe Adefeso-Olateju, thank you for your time and everything you said today.

Dr Adefeso-Olateju: An absolute pleasure, Patrick. Thanks to the [Nextier] team. You guys are fabulous. I am so grateful for your work in public policy, and I thank you for continuously moving the needle. It is great to be here and, of course, to have this wonderful conversation with you, Patrick.

Patrick O. Okigbo III: Always, anytime. Thank you, Mo. And thanks to everyone for joining. We will meet again in two weeks to discuss internal democracy in Nigerian party politics with a great speaker, Salisu Mohammad Lukman. I hope you join us again as we continue the discussions. Thank you very much.

Education Reform:

PRIVATE EDUCATION FOR THE POOR

Patrick O. Okigbo III in conversation with
Dr. Modupe Adefeso-Olateju

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