

INTERVIEW WITH SR. ANTOINETTE NNEKA OPARA, SOCIETY OF THE HOLY CHILD JESUS, AFRICAN PROVINCE



Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “Education is crucial; it is a fundamental human right. So, my worst nightmare is the children who do not get admitted into the schools. Africa is already notorious for too many out-of-school children, those who live either in rural areas with few educational facilities or in communities besieged by conflicts.”
- “Fear of violence is widespread... To better understand what violence students were experiencing in school, I used an avenue (google form) that could provide anonymity to the students so that they would have the freedom to express themselves and give me a clearer perspective on school discipline, disciplinary measures, violence and the result. I was interested in creating awareness...”

Would you describe your work, and some of the particularities of your organization?

I am a Sister of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus (SHCJ), and I am currently in the last phase of a sabbatical program of renewal and transformation in Nairobi, Kenya. From 2014 to 2020, I was on my congregation's Province Leadership Team and the Coordinator of Education for the Sisters for three years.

Currently, during my sabbatical, my only formal responsibility for the SHCJ is as a member in the Education Committee of the SHCJ African Province and privately mentoring some teachers. Because it is a time of renewal, I have used the opportunity to study a bit of spiritual and formation at Tangaza University College, got a certificate program on counselling psychology and another certificate program on Spiritual Guidance. These have produced the needed renewal for ministry that I desired. After the sabbatical, I hope to teach at the university and I will spend the holidays creating awareness among Religious who teach in secondary schools on 'restorative justice practice'. I hope to develop capacity to institutionalize restorative justice through a group of Religious in their schools and apostolates.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Sr. Antoinette Nneka Opara, from the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, talks about her experience in running Catholic schools for girls in Nigeria and in particular implementing a survey to better understand violence in schools from the point of views of the students.

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Until recently, you were working in Nigeria as the principal of a Catholic School for girls. What were some of the challenges you faced?

We all agree that education is crucial; it is a fundamental human right. So, my worst nightmare is the children who do not get admitted into the schools. Africa is already notorious for too many out-of-school children, those who live either in rural areas with few educational facilities or in communities besieged by conflicts. I wish that I could admit every child that applied to the school or sustain attendance for those in the schools, but this is not feasible, and our schools face a wide range of challenges that I can only briefly mention here.

Some challenges are internal. They include a lack of basic infrastructure, issues related to the fact that many schools tend to focus only on high achieving students, which leaves other students unable to join our schools, and a context of exacerbated competition. Competition can be a good thing, but when competition becomes an end in itself, it defeats the purpose of learning. External challenges include a lack of skilled teachers, insecurity which remains pervasive in Nigeria, and at times discordant priorities due to financial pressure to ensure schools are sustainable. A lack of discipline is also an issue, and how to deal with this issue is not always straightforward. The fact that teacher pay is low is also a major issue, as is the fact that many students learn in a "foreign" language as opposed to their native language.

And what are some of the opportunities that you see for Catholic Schools?

I have an addictive positive mindset, so I tend to see opportunities everywhere. For example, during COVID-19 restrictions, in Nigeria Catholic schools were among the few schools that could avail learning opportunities to their students through various online learning platforms. When schools reopened, our student population scaled up.

I think we have several opportunities and some are underutilized. Pope Francis' leadership and his teachings on education, community, solidarity, etc. provide the impetus for reinventing educational pedagogies for Catholic schools. Catholic schools in Africa see their role in educating young people as preparing leaders, family makers, nation builders, and society role models and trailblazers. Therefore, staff leave no stone unturned in the holistic formation of the students. We have the resources to enable such formation to happen. Catholic schools enjoy the trust of parents, governments and the public to have the capacity to deliver results. You find out that even Muslims and people of no religion still bring their

children to Catholic schools. We cannot and should never take this trust for granted but must work hard to justify it.

Other assets include networks as well as a pool of highly educated and experienced religious men and women. In Nigeria, there are multiple religious congregations with an enviable educational tradition. They include the Society of Jesus, the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, St Louis Sisters, School Sisters of Notre Dame, etc. The nation stands to benefit tremendously when we effectively harness these resources. Alumni are another asset. These individuals are often willing to support school development projects and programs. Most schools connect with them, but we should do more.

In Nigeria, you conducted an interesting survey about violence in two schools. How did this idea come about?

As a principal and administrator, students could speak directly with me or send feedback notes. Despite these communication links, I knew that some students felt not heard, especially in discipline matters. I learned school discipline to be like this: a student misbehaves, and you discipline them in whatever appropriate way the school management wants. We need to do better, but for this we need to understand what students go through. Students need to be able to comfortably voice their perceptions and views on school discipline.

The fear of violence is widespread, including violence external to the schools. In Lagos, one day, a student played a prank by lighting a bunch of fireworks in the hostel. The explosion was unexpected that I thought terrorists had invaded the college. I called the Army and the police for security support before realizing that it was fireworks. I was not alone in this fear of attack, every student and staff that heard that sound felt the same way. The counsellors had sessions with the students to rid them of the attendant stress from that experience. Violence is a real threat to education in Nigeria. When I left the college and had the chance to revisit vital moments and experiences in that school, I realized that this could be just one instance of the impact of violence, minor or critical, on learners in a school community.

So, to better understand what violence students were experiencing in school, I used an avenue (google form) that could provide anonymity to the students so that they would have the freedom to express themselves and give me a clearer perspective on school discipline, disciplinary measures, violence and the result. I was interested in creating awareness on discipline as well as violence.



Photo: First graduation at LN school, Oghara.

What did you learn from the survey? How was it useful for the schools?

The survey was an eye-opener. The students and staff responded honestly and confidently. It was an inspirational project because it revealed feelings and perceptions on management actions concerning discipline. If the school management team felt that their procedures were adequate, the survey created loopholes and questions seeking answers. Students may view things that the Management team would consider minor as critical; our actions, thoughts, words, and inactions offend people more than we imagine. Secondly, students in Catholic schools experience violence and are concerned about and understand the impact of violence on themselves and others. Issues around safety and security are majorly external but can lead to deep-seated socio-emotional crises for some individuals. So every infringement that harms another must be given adequate attention through a well-thought-out relationship healing and restoration process. Simple technology can support an important project like this one. Some people might consider Google forms an eccentric part of academic research, but it served the purpose in this case and

effectively. Relationships among teens need support, and the school community must be alert to the prompts indicating that it needs attention. Bullying is one of the prompts, and 'suicide attempt' is another.

After we implemented the surveys to better understand students' experience with violence in the schools, the schools received the survey results as a working document to improve the school culture and learning environment. The disciplinary committee and the Management team studied the responses and identified areas of conflict in school procedures and students relationships. In one of the schools, the students' Council also discussed some aspects of the survey to create awareness of available techniques for resolving conflict. The document proved to be worthwhile for creating awareness of the issues that can lead to violence in the school and how the available strategies can enable the resolution and rebuilding of strained relationships among staff and students.

What is your advice to other school principals or teachers on finding ways to listen to the voice of children and youth?

Listening and giving a voice are critical aspects of empowering young people. Most teens would complain that their parents do not listen to them, and therefore the school has to be intentional and regularly listen to their feelings by creating the right atmosphere. It is the responsibility of the principal to ensure this happens. I thought that a pastoral counselling office would resolve this issue considerably for us. And it did, when I set it up. A pastoral counsellor, if well trained, provides an active and empathetic listening to students' problems and liaises with the principal and parents in a manner that satisfies students' needs.

During the study on violence, I encountered the expression 'restorative justice', and I delved into it. I believe it is one of the strategies that would build the skill and attitude of open conversation around delicate issues, such as relationships and violence, solidarity, deliberate harm and human dignity. Restorative justice is an area I would like to work further on, and if I get support in terms of grants, I hope to develop a training package for Religious who work in the classrooms to learn the principle and practice of restorative justice. With all the socialization of young people into wars and conflict, Africa needs more of this strategy in our classrooms.

After conducting the survey, I was excited and convinced that if this is replicated in other Catholic schools, the results might be similar. I have contacted some colleagues and have encouraged them to permit me to repeat the survey for their schools. We need these opportunities to hear our students and staff on such and many other issues.

Another piece of information I want to share with other school principals relates to our understanding of the essence of schooling. Scores and grades are critical, but children also need the education to cultivate social and emotional skills. That is why any place, person, or situation that enables you to acquire a skill is an educational experience. Many schools may not have realized that successful people did not rely solely on their certificates, i.e. their cognitive abilities, but also on skills. We often hear of soft skills necessary for the workplace. Some experts have broken these skills into effective communication and negotiation skills, compassion and empathy, learning continuously, ability to manage relationships with others, and adaptability and flexibility. I will also add resilience. I insisted that our students learn and practice effective communication, critical thinking and supportive collaboration. We must enable them to actively connect with other children, learning to cooperate, support and be in solidarity with others. How a school is structured will enable its students to imbibe and practice these skills.

They are not in books, but the school can tweak its curricula to accommodate activities, projects, and research work that will generate these skills.

In addition, a vigorous supportive network of fellow professionals is crucial if you want to succeed. No one can do it alone and do it well. As the saying goes, if you want to travel fast, you go alone, but you go with others if you desire to travel far. I connected with principals interested in school improvement. This connection was not just for excellent exit records but for producing skilled individuals confident about improving the world. I also had links with educational businesses that create programs and services. Presently I am a member of the Board for CogniLearn Limited, as a non-executive director. This group develops student skills for assessment in English and Mathematics. The school was a beehive of learning events and programs outside the traditional curricula.

Finally, Catholic educational institutions work towards human flourishing. Everyone who attends Catholic schools in Africa is enabled to rise from poverty. The quality of education – the whole package – ensures that life improves tremendously for that individual and, through them, the family members. Policymakers understand this education cycle – life improvement, more education, more improvement. The more people get educated, the more they access knowledge, rights, especially education, and privileges. Leadership is one of those privileges that the poor who become well educated may access. We must continue to take this task seriously!

There is an issue that Catholic school principals need to evaluate and reinvigorate for students. African children do not question real or perceived reality. But the new narrative must include serious questioning of educational content and assumptions, supposed facts about people, and their rights and privileges. This is an aspect of the education that African children need – searching and seeking truth – the truth that sets one free - to rise out of the deplorable situation. The global community is contending with diversified problems such as the pandemic, global warming, political instability and conflicts, financial insecurities and unequal distribution of wealth. Our children must be trained to grapple with world issues to prepare themselves for communion, collaboration and stupendous global impact. Think of Pope Francis' Global Compact on Education.

Could you please share how you ended up in your current position, and what was your personal journey?

Joining an educational, religious order cut short my dream of majoring in Parasitology. My first degree was in zoology and I wanted to continue to parasitology to research the causes of ill health. After my first profession, in September 1996, I was sent to a school to teach at

Loyola Jesuit College (LJC) Abuja where I taught Science and Mathematics. That environment groomed me so I was sold on teaching, although not just teaching but also knowledge production. At LJC, the principal and vice-principal were excellent. I noted and replicated some of their strategies when I became principal for the first time. They introduced me to 'Reflection on Action' in teaching and learning. That has stayed with me since then. I employed and practiced this outstanding learning and improvement tool for school leadership. The 'reflection on action' principle motivated me to write my first book - a memoir of my schooling experience. In between my years as a teacher, I worked at the Centre for Renewal Jos, where the Sisters organized workshops on Spirituality and Formation. I learnt the skills of facilitation from there. After some years as a teacher, the sisters sent me to study Educational management and policy studies at King's College, London in 2005. While studying, I visited some schools in London and Milton Keynes and expanded my knowledge base of school leadership. On my return to Nigeria in 2007, I became the principal of Our Lady of Nigeria School – an all-girls boarding school in Oghara Delta state. It was an exciting and fulfilling first time in school leadership. The staff and students and parents supported all my initiatives for the growth of the school. I knew every child by first name and surname; knew their parents and some siblings. It was like a family school. Later I was re-missioned to begin another school, Holy Child College Asa – Benue state, in the middle belt region of Nigeria. It was a poor area but I knew that the SHCJ Education paradigm could work there too.

I had the opportunity of participating in Educational conferences and I was one of the delegates to the Education Conference of 2017 in Rome, where outstanding educationists like Professor Grace of St Mary's University were featured. At that conference, Pope Francis charged us to 'go to the peripheries' 'stop looking at the world from the balcony' and teach the students the language of 'head, heart and hands.' From then I have continued to unpack what these expressions entailed for me as a principal. After all these years in school leadership, I want to teach again and directly offer teachers what I have been privileged to receive!

Is there anything else you would like to share with readers?

I would like to conclude with the following suggestions regarding access to education for school children in Africa. We must tinker with establishing free community day schools in partnership with whoever is willing to help

– whether at the primary or secondary level. Imagine the situation where we would have one free school in each Diocese in Africa! How do we provide staff for these free schools? We either have a Catholic schools graduate scheme to serve these schools or initiate a voluntary teaching program. Voluntary service is an excellent source of happiness for a Christian. We may be surprised that a voluntary teaching scheme will attract many Catholic professionals, even retired ones and young people with no faith orientation. Also, while we do what is possible as a Church, we must also lobby the government and policymakers to increase the budget for the education sector yearly. Although budget increment does not translate to more action for education, we would continue to hold each other accountable for our actions or inaction concerning the welfare of young people.

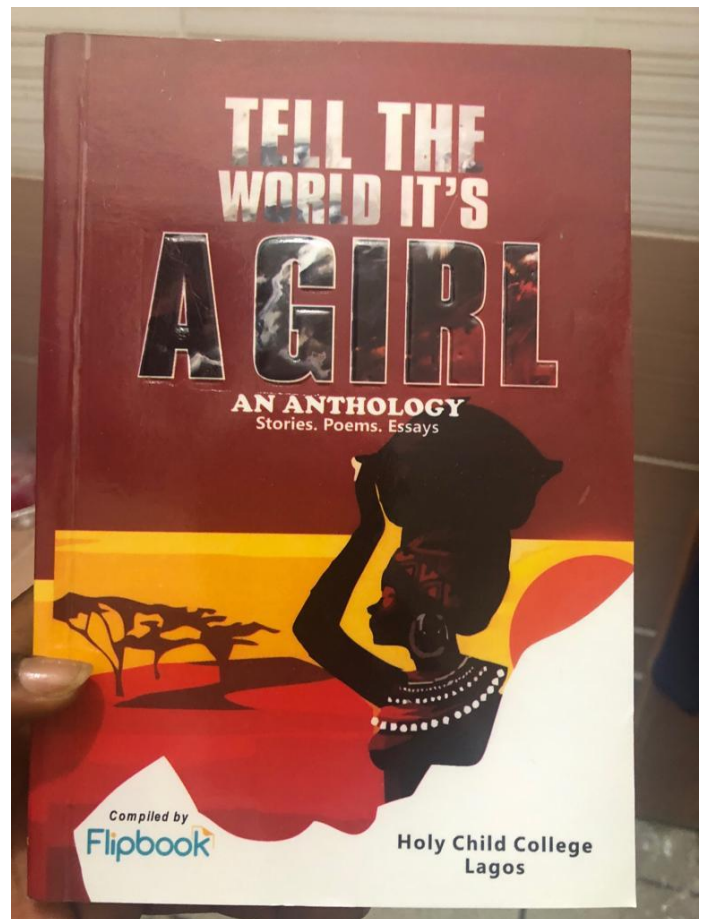


Photo: Holy Child College Knowledge Project.