Way back in the late ‘60’s, the General Yakubu Gowon government had an overriding passion to heal the wounds of the just ended Nigerian civil war, hence the 3 R’s declaration viz:

- Reconciliation
- Restoration
- Renovation

The essence of the 3Rs drive was to unify a nation whose fragmentation had been accentuated by a very divisive civil war.

The principle was simple: build decent boarding schools, throw in young unpolluted minds from across the nooks & crannies of Nigeria, ignore the vagaries of tribes and tongue, which were bound to differ, in a 250-strong multi-ethnic “nation” hurriedly put together by some adventurous Lord Lugard and named Nigeria by a lazy linguist who couldn’t see why handshakes across the winding Niger River Niger were such big deal!

Coming in the period when Kings & Queens Colleges Lagos were about the only schools that had some semblance of being National schools, the principle of unity through education couldn’t have been better timed.

Federal Government Colleges were conceived to be unifying institutions, bringing together young Nigerian teenagers from multifarious ethnic & religious divides with a view to instilling high quality education into the students in an environment of academic &
developmental excellence devoid of ethnic, religious or social stratification that ruled
Nigeria then and unfortunately continues to plague Nigeria till today.

The architects of the unity schools chose an appropriate pay-off to reflect their motive
hence the “Pro-Unitate” (for Unity) sign-off that was part of the logo of all Federal
Government Colleges.

The first set of Federal Government Colleges were sited in true “Federal Character Spirit”
with representation in the North, South, West and East. They were: Federal Government
College Sokoto, Federal Government College, Warri, Federal Government College
Odogbolu and Federal Government College, Enugu.

These schools were set up to provide high quality education to children from across the
various areas of the country with teachers from across the world.
The Pan-Nigerian nature of the schools was enshrined in the replicated design of the
hostels and classrooms that was undertaken by Dr. Alex Ekwueme’s architectural firm.
Ekwueme has since then shown himself to be not just an architect of physical structures
but also the political “architect” of the current day 6-zone geo-political entity still called
Nigeria.
Recall that Ekwueme it is who is credited with the concept of the current 6-geopolitical
zones now known as the North-East, North-West, North-Central, South-South, South-East
and South-West.

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Never mind that the Yorubas feel short-changed that their span of influence has been shrunken from the full west, (which in terms of geometry of the 60’s – 80’s was a third of the Nigerian entity) to the more geographically apt, but less ego-boosting description of “South- West”.

Federal Government College, Ilorin is best described as a second-generation unity school. On expansion of the Nigerian geopolitical structure from its early 3 regions structure to a 12-state nation, the policy makers of the Gowon era decided to expand the unity school concept to operate in all the 12 states of the federation. This principle of each state having Federal Government College representation has been carried on till date where there are now twice as many Federal Government Colleges as there are states in the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

FGC Ilorin was founded in February 1973, with a student population of fewer than 100 pupils in the site that is now known as the Ilorin Teachers College. FGC Ilorin had the good fortune of having an experienced and dedicated educationist and administrator as its first school principal in the person of Chief A. Bola Olaniyan.

Chief Olaniyan, originally trained as a mathematics teacher, had cut his administrative teeth in one of the pioneer unity schools, FGC Sokoto. While at Sokoto, Olaniyan had served as Vice-Principal and had been properly groomed to run a school professionally. This experience was deployed to best use by the powers that be when he was appointed as the first principal of FGCI.

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Olaniyan’s task was that of molding a model school from the start through simultaneous development of academic excellence in both the teaching staff and students.

Chief Olaniyan put his experience to work for the first few years of FGC Ilorin’s infancy when he built a core set of enduring values in the psyche of both teachers and students.

Student 001 was the young Inusa Abdullai who has now blossomed into full maturity as a Navy Captain (Colonel-equivalent in the Nigerian Army).

FGC Ilorin has grown to be a notable cauldron for the production of many of Nigeria’s current leaders in both the public and private sector.

The school has produced amongst several others, notable and distinguished Nigerians such as Gov. Donald Duke of Cross-Rivers State, lecturers and professors in Nigerian universities of repute, Honorable Ministers, Officers and Gentlemen in the Armed forces, Entrepreneurs, captains of industry in the private sector, national athletes, etc.

Amongst some of the eminent names produced by FGC Ilorin are:

Chief (Sir) Marc Wabara Chairman/CEO Hallmark Bank Plc.
Prof. Ademola Popoola Head, Dept. of International Law, Obafemi Awolowo University
Alh. Buhari Bala two-time ex-Minister of the Federal Government.
Benjamin Oviosu MD Diamond Bank, Republic of Benin
Col. Tariye Ndiomu, etc.
FEDERAL GOVERNMENT COLLEGES:
UNITY SCHOOLS FORGOTTEN, A NATION’S UNITY FORSAKEN?

Many parents in the 70’s & up till the 90’s confirmed the truism of the age-old adage that when the soup is sweet, then there is the distinct possibility of eating several helpings of such soup. It was indeed commonplace to see parents send all their kids to FGC Ilorin in natural succession.

Families that had multi-sibling attendance in FGC Ilorin include:

The Ndiomus (Tariye, Ebizi & Charles)
The Ekundayos (Yinka & Gbenga)
The Olofinbobas {(Kayode, Kola & Kemi)}
The Folayans (Rayo & Tipe)
The Obasekis (Deji, Eghosa & Osarieme)
The Obatoyinbos (Bisi, Suji & Ibukun)
The Eruchalus (Emeka, Ifeanyi & Kene)
The Shagaris (Aminu & Musa)
The Odumahs (Basil & Christopher)
The Koshonis (Patrick & Kenneth)
The Suinners (Raphael and Conrad)
The Abahs (Paul & Sisame)
The Ogundeles (Michael & Emmanuel)
The Olaniyans (Kofo, Tosin, Gbenga and Tola)
The Daramolas (Yinka & Tayo)
The Oduntans (Ayo & Laide)
The Durotoyes (Pade & Jibike)

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Indeed the roll call of FGCI students in those days was like a roll call of the who-is-who in Nigeria. Interestingly however, these silver spoon kids had to hold their own against the “children of nobodies” who had secured their admission on merit just like the children of the who-is-who.

Such was the intense nature of academic competition in Ilorin that it mattered not who your father was, what counted was who you were as manifested by your academic, sporting and social prowess.

FGC Ilorin was a school that thrived on its penchant for leaving no room for average students. All students were tutored to believe that they could be the best and equal attention was devoted to all students regardless of whose child you were. In FGC Ilorin of the 70’s and 80’s, a difference in score of just 5 percent points could account for 5 positions behind the leader. It was thus not uncommon to see students drop subjects where the teachers “hoarded” marks unduly and opt for other subjects where there was greater transparency in scripts marking.

Yours truly was an example of such dramatic subjects switches. Having scored 100% in Islamic Religious knowledge (nothing less would have been expected from the Great Grandson of a former chief Imam of Ogbomoso land!) but awarded only 90% on account of the teachers “stinginess”, one had to change course from Islamic Religious knowledge to Bible knowledge. Although the change did not affect this “young” student’s faith & belief in Remi Adeseun
Allah, it was indeed enough affronts to the IRK teacher who had become the object of taunts by the “winner of souls” as the Bible Knowledge teacher perceived herself.

FGC Ilorin prided itself in its ability and orientation of providing all-round excellent students who were as good in scoring A’s (aggregate 6 in those days) as they were in scoring centuries on the cricket pitch as well as in other varied social forms of endeavor such as Acting, dancing and “toastng”.

A product of a Federal Government College is easy to tell apart in today’s Nigeria by his vastness of knowledge across multiple disciplines and his spectrum of friends across various ethnic divides. It is gratifying to note that this high academic standard and detribalized mindset still manages to be retained in many of the Federal Government Colleges. What is very shocking to note and almost impossible to come to terms with is the extent of squalor (at least in terms of physical infrastructure and amenities) to which these schools have been plunged.

FGC Ilorin is celebrating its 30th anniversary of existence on the 13th of February 2003. To commemorate the event, and to showcase the school as the spring that produced illustrious Nigerians like Governor Donald Duke, Chief (Sir) Marc Wabara, et al, the current old students association executive decided to commission a documentary with the theme of: “FGCI The Past, The Present, and The Future”.

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The production crew for this documentary was headed by Toye Arulogun, (MD, Tall & Wide and anchor of the rested popular TV program “Lagos Sense”) himself an alumnus of FGC Ilorin.

The original script of the documentary was written in such a way that the main objective of the documentary was to showcase the beauty that was FGC Ilorin, the producer of many of the nation’s engine room drivers in various fields of endeavor (State Governors, Senators, High court judges, Bank MDs etc)

It took a 3-day filming visit to the school to puncture this euphoric script direction. The sorry state of the school led the production crew and the old students association executive to change the slant of the documentary to that of an urgent wake-up call!

Gone were the sights of well-structured hostels where almost all the students’ basic requirements were provided, from 6-foot, multi-compartment steel wardrobes to regular toiletries on weekly basis for all students.

The sight of students “pumping iron”, not in a gym but on a “one-armed bandit” borehole contraption, was enough to send even the most shock-proof old student into a state of disbelief. The hostels are in such a sorry state that anyone who does not catch the title of the documentary at the beginning would have been justified to assume that the shots were taken in Kirikiri prison.

With students having their bath in the open fields, eating breakfast of bread and stew with no form of protein, no tea, and no drinking water on the table, it was simply impossible to
imagine that this is the same school where students as a matter of routine were (in the years gone bye!) assured of meals fit for Princes and Princesses.

In the good old days, balanced meals were served almost straight out of the best home economics textbooks! Bread, Butter (hence the nick-name AJE BUTTER) and eggs in the morning, Eba, vegetable soup and fish in the afternoon, Rice, plantain and beef in the evenings, and even chicken, ice-cream and peanuts on Sundays.

It was simply an exercise in torture for the current students to listen to these “tales by moonlight” as narrated by the old students who went on the documentary production trip to Federal Government College, Ilorin. That the administrators of these schools have still been able to produce students who excel in WASC, NECO and JAMB exams is indeed a huge credit to them because their task can be compared to that of a person who has rocks tied to his hands and feet, is dumped at the deep end of the swimming pool and is instructed to ensure that he doesn’t drown!

The plague of strikes that has turned most Nigerian Universities into glorified degree sales markets has sneakily crept into the Federal Government Colleges as well. At the moment, teachers in many of the unity schools are on strike owing to non-payment of salaries and allowances dating back to October 2002. The Principals of these schools have practically become beggars on an almost permanent transfer to Abuja where they litter the corridors of the Federal Ministry of Education, begging any clerk who might be in a position to help push their schools funds allocation file from one table to another.

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Many social commentators and even the most unlettered Nigerian have noted that almost all facets of our national existence have been allowed to deteriorate terribly.

Federal allocation to fund education from primary to tertiary has declined to an all-time low of just 1.85% of the National Budget.

Contrary to what most people think, this malaise has affected not just the Universities, which are lucky to have a vibrant watchdog in ASUU, but also the Federal Government Colleges which form the focus of this write-up have been devastated by official neglect.

The consequence of this system failure is that the hitherto unimaginable is starting to become commonplace in the Federal Government Colleges. As idle minds have always been known to be the devil’s workshop, the children of these schools have started to fall into the bottomless pit of vices such as, but not limited to secret cults!

As we approach a transition from this present government to perhaps the same administration (never under-estimate the power of incumbency in Nigeria), it is crucial that parents, students, teachers and other eligible Nigerians start to decide which person(s) or party to vote for based on the commitment of such parties to revamping our educational system.

In the 1960s', the government of the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo made indelible marks in the lives of many Western Nigerians through its single-minded focus on developing the educational sector. India is today benefiting immensely from its government’s well thought
through decision some 20 years ago to make education (especially Information Technology) the arrowhead of its national developmental program. This has led to a positive situation where over 20% of India’s GDP is now derived from its intellectual property development.

Without virile, well-equipped and functional secondary schools, it is practically impossible for a nation to achieve its full potential. It is never too late to turn back the hand of the retrogressive clock ticking away furiously in the Nigerian Education sector. This is why, on behalf of beneficiaries of qualitative education received from one of Nigeria’s best schools-Federal Government College Ilorin, I am appealing through this medium to all our leaders in Government, especially the executive and legislative arms, to please spare a thought for the needs of the children of the common man who can not afford the six digit figures required to send children to the Igbinedion, Adesoye, Atlantic Hall, etc not to talk of the Etons of the world.

A house that is built on a weak foundation is bound to collapse. Secondary school education as provided by the likes of Federal Government College Ilorin is the foundation for a meaningful and productive education.

Let our leaders be aware that although they can afford to send their own children to the Eton, Atlantic Hall and Adesoye of this world, if they continue to ignore the educational needs of the children of the masses, neither them nor their children will know peace. This is no curse; it’s just the karma that awaits the unjust.

Remi Adeseun
Mr. Remi Adeseun wrote this piece. He is the President, FGC Ilorin Old Students Association,

( Lagos Chapter.)