



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

THE WOODROW WILSON SCHOOL
OF PUBLIC AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Series: Teacher Payroll

Interview no.: A 5

Interviewee: Samuel I. Johnson & Mary W. Mulbah

Interviewer: Blay Kenyah

Date of Interview: 17 August 2017

Location: Liberia

Mary Mulbah and Samuel Johnson were teachers' union leaders at the time of the interview. They explain the basis of their opposition to a ghost-worker removal and teacher certification effort carried out by Liberia's Ministry of Education in 2017, with support from Big Win Philanthropy. The stated purpose of that program was to improve the quality of education in Liberia's schools. At the time the project started, the Ministry of Education also launched a separate experimental program with the international for-profit network of schools, Bridge Academies, to manage several model schools. The union opposed the Bridge Academies initiative, and the objections carried over to the program to remove ghost workers and require testing and re-training of teachers some teachers. This interview helps readers understand the teachers' union view of the vetting program. This interview was edited to reduce repetition and provide clarifying information.

KENYAH: Thank you very much for agreeing to talk to me. We would like to understand the perspectives of teachers about the recent effort to remove ghost workers from the teacher payroll and identify teachers who need additional training. Perhaps we can start with a short introduction, who you are, where you're from, your role over here, and just some general information.

MULBAH: *I'm Mary W. Mulbah, acting national president, National Teacher Association of Liberia. I'm a classroom teacher from Margibi County and Bong and professional teacher in Liberia.*

JOHNSON: *I am Samuel Y. Johnson, head of The National Secretariat, teacher by profession, graduate from the William V.S. Tubman Teachers College in Harper, Liberia. I've been in the field for over 22 years. Before coming to this position, I taught both in the public and private schools. I established a high school. I worked with the International Rescue Committee in exile. And I've been in the field for long.*

As student leaders at a teacher's college, we worked with the ministry to solve in-service teachers' problems from the 15 counties. However, the current minister declined to work with us, the union.

KENYAH: Before we started this interview, you said that you disagreed with the minister's decision to experiment with a private company, Bridge Academies. The teacher testing and vetting program sounds like it will solve some of the problems that you mentioned: like putting people on the payroll and making sure that their pay is commensurate with their level.

JOHNSON: *The ministry tells the world that vetting is helping, but they have not provided the evidence. It is our responsibility to make sure that we monitor these things, that they are realistic, they are factual.*

There are teachers right now who graduated as far back as 2009 to 2012. They are still in the classroom. They went through the vetting

process. They did the biometrics. But until now these teachers are being underpaid. They are not being paid according to their qualification, as graduates from the William V.S. Tubman teacher's college.

Right now, teachers are poor. I have over 800 of them. Some of the metro teachers from Nimba County, where we have the highest number of public school teachers and schools, up to now, they have been underpaid. Most of them are even deciding to leave the classroom. Some of our colleagues have graduated as far back as 2009 along with us from the university. They are still being underpaid.

So, all of these things we are saying, this is why we said: Let's have a neutral body that will come and judge. We told them that we want people from the legislature to set up a committee, along with our international partners and the national school board. We should all sit around the table with every representative, from both the public and private sector, so that we can really look at the reform and see who is really saying the truth.

The ministry says there is not enough funding, but the impact of the money they have spent is not being felt. In some of the areas they built schools, and because they did not consult us, the population is less in those areas and the schools are standing and you don't find kids to go in there. Whereas they have other areas that are overcrowded, where they should build more schools to accommodate the population, and they never consulted the people.

KENYAH: But they have access to that information...

JOHNSON: *The reality is that even with the biometrics they did [issuance of biometric ids], there are still ghosts [ghost employees] being recruited. They left the legitimate teachers out but put new ghosts on the payroll.*

Now they are compelling the teachers to go back and take WAEC [West Africa Examinations Council] again. We are saying no. If I have my degree and the war came and burned the whole structure that I was dwelling in, then I cannot provide the document. But there are still people that can attest that I graduated in the university that I graduated from. Then you're compelling me to go back and go take the high school WAEC exam to pass before you can give me my masters test. We are saying, "No, these things are not fair."

Those that graduated after the war and don't have their documents-- those are the ones that you should compel to do the WAEC exam.

These are the misunderstandings that we've been having. WAEC should not be the criteria set to qualify someone.

- MULBAH:** *There is another thing about the teacher vetting. We feel that we ourselves are interested in working with qualified teachers ... We had a problem after fighting [a civil war] for 14 years. But we don't know why the minister is contesting credentials because these people that they are calling unqualified today, they have been working. They have been doing everything.*
- If there is a deficiency in the system, I think we should identify that and work on that. Maybe we can retrain those teachers. And we put all of these things in the plan.*
- [The teacher vetting program is flawed.] Even the biometrics they did in the few counties, you will find out from all of our representatives in all the counties, that the ministry was accepting people who are not teachers and giving them biometric ids. But they're dropping the qualified teachers from the classroom. We are seeing this. It's a very serious thing, very serious. Maybe it's good that we are speaking out. People will hear it. As it starts to happen, people will know that yes, somebody was saying this. It will be worse than ever before if we continue what we are doing now.*
- KENYAH:** To play devil's advocate, the ministry will argue that they are collecting data right now and then they will decide on what to do after they finish collecting the data.
- MULBAH:** *For what? Collecting the data and the people, the students, will already be affected. Yes.*
- KENYAH:** But without the data collection, things will still remain the same.
- JOHNSON:** *They are not the only ones that started collecting data. There was data collected by UNICEF, by UNESCO, and by UCEF [United Nations Children's Fund]. They are just trying to improve on it. Every three to four years, they collect data. [The minister] makes too much publicity out of issues as if to say he's investing when he's just following what people did. [Expressed concern that the minister is overly focused on Bridge Academies.]*
- KENYAH:** So just to recap, the issues that you have with the teacher testing and vetting problem are 1) that you've not seen the result of it; 2) you are not involved in the entire process; and 3) there are ghosts that are still on the payroll and there are people who exist who are being dropped out [removed from the payroll].
- JOHNSON:** *They are recruiting ghosts, giving them biometrics, adding costs.*

- KENYAH: Let's investigate that one a little bit further. So, from what we understand about how the process works. The county and district education officers try to publicize that people are coming to register teachers. "If you are a teacher registered in this district, we will be coming here from this day to this day to register you." If the teacher doesn't show up, isn't that person released?
- JOHNSON: *There were more than 1000 in-service teachers at the university. I was chairperson for the four years I was there, for the 15 counties. We had lists that were authenticated by the previous minister. These people are in school attending the university with our MOU, memorandum of understanding, signed between the ministry with the predecessor and the students, that when they graduate they are to go somewhere for additional classes. The new minister has dropped all of these guys from the payroll and cancelled all of these scholarships.*
- So the government invested more than three years into these graduates' education, but all of this money will go down the drain because he has dropped their names from the payroll.*
- MULBAH: *Another thing is some of these people, they do not do their [certification] test. Before you do the test, you must be assigned to a school. If you are deleted [because you are not working in a school], they will not allow you to do the test.*
- MULBAH: *And there are some teachers who are still teaching in the classroom and hoping that the ministry would put them back on the payroll. That happened to my own son who stayed teaching. He taught all through the school year, but his name is not on the payroll and he was not allowed to do the test.*
- KENYAH: So, when were these people deleted?
- MULBAH: *Some of them over a year, some of them two years. But with the hope that money will go there, they still teach.*
- KENYAH: Which office deletes people from the payroll?
- JOHNSON: *It is from three places. Some people, they can be dropped by the Civil Service Agency, by the Minister of Finance, by the Minister of Education. They go and remove somebody, a legitimate teacher's name, from the payroll and put their own people's name receiving the salary. We have discovered so many of these cases and reported it to the ministry. Some of them were even dismissed in the process.*
- So instead of working along with us, with our members in the county, the district, and the schools to make sure that these cases are resolved, they left us out. Even when the GAC, the General Auditing Commission,*

got a grant for an allotment to go do auditing in 2010, we went along. And we were able to discover so much information. They went and deleted 3473 names from the payroll, and we went and we collected our own data. We brought it. We went to the president. We did comparative analysis. These teachers they said they were ghosts show up, some of them. [We checked.]

And when we got the evidence that proved it, we worked along with the ministry, the Civil Service Agency, and the Minister of Finance. The president mandated the minister to reinstate these teachers.

MULBAH: *We had a case of a teacher who was in school, working. And the District Education Officer entered a new name in the payroll. This man, the school never knew him, nobody knew him, and he goes and he gets paid.*

But the active teacher gets no pay. And both of them were teaching. These are the kind of cases we're talking about. This happened in the school I was teaching.

KENYAH: Isn't this what the teacher vetting and testing program is trying to solve?

JOHNSON: *It isn't solving it because.....they don't know the details. They will only call you once if your name is not on the payroll. They say you are a ghost. Then they drop your name. And they don't go into the nitty gritty of these cases.*

JOHNSON: *The new County Education Officer doesn't know the details of this thing.....it may be that the man that is in the classroom teaching, he had a letter of assignment and they disallow him to do the biometrics because they say his name is not on the payroll. So, these are the kind of cases that we are talking about when we're talking about ghosts. They are not realistic. Some of these people exist, but they deny them from being vetted.*

MULBAH: *In Bong County, over 400 teachers, they consider them to be supplementary teachers. Most of them were not vetted, and they are the ones they are calling ghosts.*

KENYAH: Why were they not vetted? Supplementary teachers were vetted weren't they?

JOHNSON: *Not all of them.*

KENYAH: Why weren't all of them vetted?

JOHNSON: *These types of cases...They are not on the payroll.*

KENYAH: The reason why this program is happening is because we recognize that the payroll is flawed, right? Recognizing the payroll is flawed, I thought from what we understood, what was happening was that principals were supposed to create a list of all the teachers in their schools, send it to the District Education Officer for affirmation or for confirmation or something, and then send it to the County Education Officer so the County Education Officer also approved of it. If teachers are not on the payroll but they are on the principal's list, and then they show up that day for vetting and testing, shouldn't they have their biometric cards then?

JOHNSON: *They denied most of them.*

KENYAH: So if the name was on the principal's list but was not on the payroll list, what happens?

MULBAH: *The teacher was not allowed to do the biometrics.*

KENYAH: How?

JOHNSON: *Well, let me tell you. These are all new people that just took over, inexperienced and some of them, and they act out of emotion. [People were on the payroll 2010-2012, but their names were dropped by officials. Then the new people come in. The teachers have their letters of assignment still, but they aren't on the payroll list. ... They don't see your name. Even if you are in the classroom, they will not vet you. They will say your name is not here, so they denied all of these people.*

They changed all the deputy ministers who had experience, all the people assisting the minister. All of them from the minister down to the deputies, they have changed all of them so it's only inexperienced people that don't know most of the case history. So, we as policy implementers who know the nitty gritty of the complex problems in the schools, if we go along with them, we will be able to identify these people.

JOHNSON: *I mean, there are a lot of errors that we saw that we know we can improve.*

MULBAH: *One woman who was not on the payroll and did not teach was allowed to do the biometric id because her in-law is now the acting District Education Officer.*

KENYAH: Do you have a legal channel through which you can address all of these grievances?

JOHNSON: *Our constitution requires that when we try all the mediation processes and fail, we go to the court. We have been consulting our legal team,*

and here the process is very expensive. Sometimes we go two, three months while they hold our operational dues that empower us to do these things, just to strangle us from carrying on our advocacy. After we started engaging the media, paying the media fees to adequately educate the citizens about what we are seeing, providing evidence from both national and international sources, they started withholding our dues.

KENYAH: So you're planning on taking this to court?

JOHNSON: *This is why we are now meeting with all the political parties. We are asking the people to support a manifesto for education. We want a government that will be successful to have a realistic educational plan that is willing to work with us to implement for the future of our children.*

KENYAH: So NTAL, the National Teachers' Association of Liberia... your members are all civil servants.

MULBAH: Yes.

KENYAH: Are private teachers part of the NTAL?

JOHNSON: *Yes, we have some private teachers that are part of the NTAL according to our mandate, our constitutional mandate.*

KENYAH: And is every teacher a defacto member of the NTAL?

JOHNSON: *Yes, all teachers and education workers in the republic are defacto members of the NTAL.*

KENYAH: I believe the NTAL encouraged its members to boycott the process. Is that right?

JOHNSON: Yes.

MULBAH: Yes.

KENYAH: But teachers still went.

JOHNSON: *Yes, because jobs are very scarce now in the country. People don't have jobs. It is because of job security. And most of the underqualified teachers, the majority in the rural areas, were intimidated... if you allowed a NTAL member to have meeting, we'll sack you or we'll cancel your contract.*

MULBAH: *That is a clear example of Margibi County because they listened to the national announcement that until we can get readdressed from the government, nobody will go to work and so they sat home. Because of*

that, they did not bother the teachers that sat home, but all of the leaders for NTAL were dismissed.

KENYAH: All of them were dismissed?

JOHNSON: *All of the leaders.*

KENYAH: The information we have indicates that in Liberia, it's incredibly difficult to fire a civil servant.

JOHNSON: *Yeah, but the government doesn't respect the civil service law.*

KENYAH: So, when we spoke to other people at the ministry, the information we got indicated that there are committees within the ministry that NTAL members, or the NTAL body, has seats in.

JOHNSON: *That is the local education group. The National Christian Council helped mediate and asked the president to require the minister to organize a round table, but no meeting took place. There were no investigations of the dismissals.*

KENYAH: So just quickly, just to have a timeline of this thing, you mentioned at the beginning of the conversation that there was some sort of planning for some sort of testing for teachers...

JOHNSON: *Who are not qualified, unqualified teachers.*

KENYAH: Yes. Not every teacher, only teachers who didn't have credentials. If we find out if the teachers are underqualified is through their credentials and some people don't have those credentials, will those people who don't have their credentials still get tested?

MULBAH: *The Civil Service Agency had already tried to issue biometric ids four times.*

MULBAH: *2010.*

JOHNSON: *2011, 2012 and 2013.*

MULBAH: *... They did the biometric before they came in with the testing.*

JOHNSON: *Big Win raised 12 million now for their testing, testing and teacher vetting for the remaining 12 counties. They are Bridge, Big Win Philanthropic...*

KENYAH: So to just repeat that to make sure that I have what you have, what you agreed to was that first there will be a vetting process throughout the

country. After the vetting, those who don't have the credentials, they will take the test.

MULBAH: ...There were some, I guess from high school, that did not do any training.

KENYAH: That didn't have letters of assignment?

JOHNSON: No. Some had letters of assignment because they were replacing other people. So those are the people that we agreed for them to do the test. They would be trained.

MULBAH: The testing was to cut down the number of teachers.

KENYAH: [As I understand it, there are three levels or certificates.] So just so I have a good idea..., to get the C certificate is first to sixth grade?

MULBAH: Yes.

KENYAH: The B certificate is...

MULBAH: Seven to nine.

KENYAH: ...seventh to ninth grade. And then the A certificate...

JOHNSON: Associate B and C is for ten to twelfth grade.

KENYAH: And all of these people first to twelve are all taking the...

MULBAH: Everybody.

JOHNSON: Everybody, even people with masters. They are asking them to take the test.

KENYAH: So, to get the C certificate, you all have the same test, right? If you have graduated from a Rural Teacher Training Institute?

JOHNSON: Yeah.

KENYAH: There was no announcement about the testing?

MULBAH: [questions about whether the instrument used really tested the skills that mattered]

MULBAH: We said no. If you are giving a test to a primary teacher, bring a primary test and see what they can do. The main objective here is how well were you presenting a message to the students. That makes you a

good teacher so the students can learn and get something from it, not only because you can write English, no. These are our points.

KENYAH: I think what I'm getting at in the question I'm asking is, I was trying to find out when exactly you pulled out of the process.

JOHNSON: *When the minister took the unilateral position to sign a contract with Bridge without our input and without listening to us. What we're saying is instead of bringing a private provider to take over our public schools, provide enough funding to upgrade the current system that we have. Some schools receive two boxes of chalk the whole year.*

KENYAH: So I guess the big question right now is what are they doing wrong that if you were part of the process you would have done right? It's apparent that you are not opposed to vetting and you are not opposed to some form of testing. That was part of your plans before Bridge and Big Win came in. And so, if you were doing it yourselves, if you were stakeholders in the process, how would you have done it?

JOHNSON: *...After the war, some people lost all their credentials because the ministry did not keep track of their record... [What is unfair is that] then you are asking me now that since you don't have your credential, you have to go back and go take WAEC exam. ...[But instead] Once you have your letter of assignment, you could have people to authenticate that you graduated from the high school...*

KENYAH: Which people to authenticate? Who would do the authentication?

JOHNSON: *The schools where you graduated from. The schools are still existing. Even people that were in those schools that can be identified. You go there and get a letter of attestation or testimony to prove that you graduated from there.*

JOHNSON: *Once you are in that category, you don't need to go take tests again. It is proven that you really graduated. But people who are not having those documents at all, the one we agree that should go take the test so that those that will pass and are fit to teach, they will be given further training, continued professional development.*

JOHNSON: *And those that will drop, they can compensate them. Because some of them are not really high school graduates, they can compensate them to go and find something else to do and to replace it with the 4000 trained teachers that were trained.... So this is the agreement we came up, but after they brought in Bridge, there was no consultation. They just went ahead and started to test everyone.*

KENYAH: So once again, we are still mixing up the Bridge Academies project, setting up an experiment with a for-profit school, and the subject here,

which is the vetting and certification project that Big Win Philanthropy helped support. I just want to understand...

JOHNSON: It is because of Bridge they brought in particular testing for everyone. Yeah, they will tell you a different story. That's why we're telling you...

KENYAH: And so just so I have it correct, so first there will be the vetting, and you have listed ways of authenticating people who are actually trained. After the vetting, those who we couldn't credential will take the test. And the test should be specific to your level and specific to what you are teaching.

MULBAH: Yes.

JOHNSON: ...the agreement from the initial stage was the minister of education, teachers in education division do the testing for underqualified and unqualified teachers, those that will pass to train them continuing professional development. But the general testing is now for everybody, whether you have a masters, a Ph.D., everybody is doing the same test.

We told them it was unprofessional. It was not authentic. What the law requires is people who already got their licenses and independent bodies should be setup like the way they've got the nursing board at the Ministry of Health who are wholly and solely responsible for testing health workers. We want a similar board to be setup by the ministry. They are saying they don't have money. But they are doing it on their own.

...There are a lot of unprofessional things these people did because they are not in the field of education. Minister Werner did not do education even though he taught in a Catholic school. ...[These officials] are interested in destroying the future of our children while their children are in America going to school. This is why we're saying no to it, because this is our country. We don't have any other country besides Liberia. They have dual citizenship. They go to the United States. They have their green card there. They come here. They work. They collect the resources and go feed their family in the States. We are saying this is the country that we have. We don't have any other country so we can't sit and allow strangers to come and destroy our country and go back.

KENYAH: And so the issue with the testing is that it's not standardized and that...

MULBAH: *It was not standardized and it should be done by a state board.*

KENYAH: Okay. Thank you very much. Okay. So it's not standardized and...

MULBAH: *...And even with a state board, they would know what to do; we are not going to have any problem with that. But when they started the test. ...nobody expected it, and some teachers have taught for 35 years, but they've never had any experience of just coming to take a test that way. So it was very strange and we told them that there was a need for more awareness to tell people what they were taking this test for and that was not done. And because we were the ones to speak and advocate for the members, we started to speak against it. We were targeted.*

KENYAH: You said people say people were afraid of taking the test, but obviously, they took tests to become teachers, so they are not afraid of taking tests. During your training to be teachers, you did English and math. How do you respond to people who say that if these are things that you are supposed to know and you are sure you will pass, why don't you just sit and take it and pass since you already know the stuff anyway?

JOHNSON: *...If I'm teaching physics, you come to give me a test in physics. If I fail, that makes me not qualified to teach at my level, then you have the right to drop me. But you can't go bring kindergarten tests because I did it 25, 30 years ago.*

Even people who are supposed to be retired, some of the older people that have gray hair. They have reached 65, some of them 70 years, they have been in the classroom for 40 years. They are asking those people to go do the test or else they will drop them. They started retiring them. Some of them have reached retirement age, but they get little no retirement benefits. So, there are a lot of errors that we have been pushing against.

MULBAH: *... But like for the junior high, you are specialized in a special area. So they focus in those areas more than other areas because that's where you want to perform. This is the difference. But for the elementary, they do general. Not to the higher levels. These are our points, that those that are supposed to do sciences, they are specialized in the sciences. They focus only on the sciences. And because you will do few prerequisite courses and you get to that area at a certain level you reach, you only focus in that area.*

KENYAH: Have you seen any of the results from any of the counties yet? Do you have information?

JOHNSON: *[Some counties offered tutorial classes.] They did tutorial for two weeks...I mean, for one week...before they started the test.*

KENYAH: Okay. We are wrapping up now.

MULBAH: *So, if you get what I said, they've got two times to go there and do some tutorial classes, the result for that is different from where they just forced on the people. This is our concern...*

KENYAH: So final question, and this might be the hardest one. Let's take the program itself and let's remove Minister Werner, the assistant and deputy ministers, Bridge, Big Win, let's remove everyone. Let's go to the program itself, is there anything you can think of that is a benefit that the program has brought?

JOHNSON: *Nothing. I don't see any benefit it has brought.*

MULBAH: *I don't see any good thing or bad thing from there. We feel that for us, we condemn it from the beginning and we continue to condemn it because we don't have interest in it, and I think we are giving enough reasons why.*

KENYAH: So not a single benefit? I mean, maybe now some ghosts are out and...

MULBAH: *But that's where we've got problem.*

JOHNSON: *...there are more legitimate teachers that are out there that...*

MULBAH: *People call their friends, come let's do the test. And because I know you, you do the test, I say you pass. So, the tests are not even doing good.*

KENYAH: So I thought in order to come around...so they started the day with the registration. You're supposed to come in with a photo ID so that no one can take the test for you. But you are saying now that people are taking the test for other people?

JOHNSON: *No. People who are not employed, for instance...*

MULBAH: *Some that would go that were not teachers at all. They go and they took the test, and they qualify you that you passed and then you do biometric.*

KENYAH: And then they give you a letter of...

MULBAH: *Assignment and you're part of that school.*

KENYAH: I thought the teachers that were coming to take the test were trained.

MULBAH: *Some of these people were not teachers.*

MULBAH: *What happened with Montserrado, Montserrado did the biometric before they brought the test. So, they never had much power on them because they already had their ID cards before. But those that were left out didn't do the biometric. They are the ones they actually suppressed because they will tell you if you don't do the test, you will not do the biometric. But there are people that did the biometric that were nowhere in the classroom. They were not teachers. Some of them are not even trained, but because they were somehow connected with somebody, during their test people that were doing the test, someone else said there are a lot of strange people here that we have never seen before in a classroom, but they all took the test. And they are the ones that go on the payroll. Then the actual people in the classroom, they are the ones that do not.*

KENYAH: So, in other places that are doing those things, in other countries that might decide to try the teacher testing and vetting program, which once gain just so I get confirmation, in principle you are not opposed to, right?

MULBAH: No.

KENYAH: In other countries that might want to do this, what sort of lessons that you have learned from here that you would advise them do this, don't do this, try this, don't try this? What are some lessons?

JOHNSON: *Our own law requires that [the government establish a state board in the ministry that will be giving tests to teachers after every four years and giving license.*

KENYAH: And as part of giving the license, teachers should be tested?

MULBAH: Yes.

JOHNSON: *Yeah, teachers will be tested before giving the license because people who did specialize in education and other people who got different degrees that are coming to teach. So, we are also advocating that those that did education as their area of specialization should be given special salary as compared to other people who got degree in different discipline that come to teach.*

MULBAH: *If the teachers are given lessons, whenever they go off track ... You're able to control the teacher at that time because anything goes wrong.*

These are things that we actually want to put in place. It will be good if it will work this way.

KENYAH: So your problem is with the manner in which they are carrying this out.

MULBAH: *The manner in which they make test for BSE, masters, everybody has one test. It's unprofessional.*

JOHNSON: *What we recommend to all of our colleagues around the world, including donor partners and other international partners like the African Development Bank, or any of these philanthropic organizations that are willing to improve education in this country, the best way to be able to succeed in having quality education in this country is to start from the grassroots. And anyone who wants to succeed in this country has to work with the teachers and all the other stakeholders in education and not even one person. So, if they want to really succeed with any plan, there is a need to go back to the drawing board and NTO should be part and parcel of whatsoever that they are doing instead of doing their own thing for personal gain.*