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# Functional Education in Nigeria: A Veritable Tool for Poverty Reduction

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## Abstract

The unemployment situation in Nigeria is a major driving force for extreme poverty, which leads to all sorts of social vices. This paper observed that the reason for this state of affairs is as a result of a dysfunctional educational system, a fall out from our past flawed colonial and immediate post-independence era. The paper sees the traditional education system as a functional education which promoted skill that makes the individuals self-reliant and productive. The traditional education was no doubt integrative, because it combined physical training with character building and manual activities. This paper examines the concept of education, so as to have a veritable background of bringing out the positive role of education in the society and the concept of poverty was looked at as a major theme of the study. This is because the paper aims at combating poverty through functional education which is believed could help to promote skill acquisition and wondered why the 6-3-3-4 system of education was abandoned in spite of its lofty ideals. This paper believes that through functional education, qualitative manpower would be increased which will create employment possibility and could enable individuals to live as responsible members of the society. The paper came to the conclusion with some recommendations for poverty reduction through functional means, such as; increase in the percentage of fund allocated to education, education in Nigeria laying emphasis on skill development, citizens cultivating the habit of entrepreneurial education, parents developing skills consciousness in their children, the revival of the 6-3-3-4 system of education which should be made more functional. Finally, the paper recommended government commitment to teachers' welfare and supervision/monitoring of education programmes.

**Key Words:** education, functional education, poverty, technical/vocational education.

## Introduction

Nigeria is known to be rich, endowed with natural and human resources. Every area in the country is blessed abundantly; their vegetation speaks volume about this fact. Due to mismanagement and wrong leadership style, our socio-economic condition has continued to deteriorate on daily basis leading to a situation where most people live below poverty line. A good example of this scenario is noticeable in the condition where majority of Nigerians live on less than one dollar a day. Little wonder in 2017, Nigeria was regarded as the poverty capital of the world. In spite of the high revenue that the country has generated since independence

from crude oil, her citizens have continuously been experiencing overwhelming poverty due to unemployment. This has made most youths to take to social vices of all sorts which have taken the form of kidnapping, armed robbery, fraud, general insecurity etc. This state of affairs has worsened the precarious situation which law abiding citizens find themselves. The gap between the rich and the poor seems to have widened the more, to an elastic proportion. As Okehi (2021) observed:

No nation has ever survived successive high rates of unemployment because of the attendant waste of human resource which it breeds and so the future prosperity of Nigeria is a function of producing youths who are well prepared and well equipped as adults with sellable skills which can enable them gainfully employed or self-employed (P.210).

In view of the foregoing, a functional education which will lead the beneficiaries to be self-employed or gainfully employed through their skills to participate in the development of Nigerian economy is the way to go. This could be through the formal, informal and non-formal system of education geared towards the reduction of poverty. This is the reason various types of entrepreneurship education have been organized by government at various levels which is seen as a crucial strategy for economic development. For instance, the economic prowess and success of Asian countries otherwise referred to as “Asian Tigers” have been made possible due to the functional nature of their education system, which gives priority to human resource development through emphasis on skills promotion in their citizens.

However, education has been regarded as a powerful tool for national development and economic recovery. Education is undisputedly recognized as the bedrock of any meaningful development. This is the reason every society, whether simple or complex have a way of training and educating its young. Education for the good life remains the greatest focus of humans throughout history. It has always been regarded as the development of the physical, mental and spiritual potentials of man. In other words, education becomes an instrument which enables beneficiaries to live efficiently and effectively, not just for their benefit but also for that of society in which the people reside.

Most importantly, education has the power to lift people from poverty. This is the reason we should not down play the role of education in poverty reduction. The emphasis of education is on three fronts, which are intellectual ability, development of skills and promotion of moral outlook of the individuals. In order to reduce the high rate of unemployment and poverty increase in Nigeria amongst the growing population of youths, education should be functional, that is education which has problem solving ability in the society. To achieve this, the focus should be on vocational and technical education, as well as entrepreneurship and other forms of education which can make the beneficiaries creative, self-reliant and productive which is in line with ‘pragmatism’ a school of thought proposed by John Dewey. Accordingly, the Philosophy of Nigeria traditional education was pragmatic, based on the idea of productivity and functionalism.

Furthermore, Nigeria’s education system and its attendant problems of emphasizing on theory rather than practice is traceable to colonial education instituted by the British government.

According to Agu in Aminigo and Osaat (2015, P.369), “the colonization by the British actually affected the entrepreneurial practices which prevailed in the traditional African society, particularly in Nigeria, where a person is known for the skill in which he earns his living”. In the traditional education, children learnt by doing. Virtues such as hardwork, productivity and self-reliance were the central point of Nigeria traditional education. There was emphasis on vocational training. Children were engaged in things like fishing, farming, cooking, weaving, carving, smiting, native medicine and others. In addition, the traditional education was considered as integrative, because of its combination of physical training, manual activity, intellectual training and character building which was holistic in practice. As Fafunwa (2004, P.2) maintained, “In the old African society, the purpose of education was clear, functionalism was the main guiding principle. African society regarded education as a means to an end not an end itself”. It is instructive to note that, there was no separation of education and productive activity or division between manual and intellectual education. The indigenous education was regarded as a means of producing a well-rounded personality to fit into the society. The traditional education was applauded for its utility or usefulness to the beneficiaries in contrast with the colonial system of education which was not vocational and technical in scope. The colonial western style education was focused on producing office workers. It was a flawed and dysfunctional education system which basically trained persons for white collar jobs in the then colonial service and this was carried on towards the immediate post-independence era. The traditional education was utilitarian in intent, because it produced people who are adequately skilled, confident and properly oriented towards eventual self-employment and self-reliance.

Consequently, the traces of the colonial and post-colonial era education system laid the background for the large scale unemployment of young person’s presently witnessed in Nigeria. Although, the Nigerian education system tend to have parted ways with the colonial system of education after the curriculum conference of 1969 and the pronouncements in the National Policy on Education; unfortunately, Nigeria’s education system as an offshoot of the colonial model which is elitist rather than functional and lacking in what modern education should represent and is responsible for producing graduates who are not creative but rely on the government for civil service jobs which are no longer in existence due to a distressed economy. Accordingly, Seethramu (2008, P. 120) avers that “education should be designed and administered in such a way that each individual has to develop to the fullest extent their abilities and realize their potentialities”. It is in response to the foregoing, that the federal government in 2006 directed that the teaching of entrepreneurial skills be incorporated in all programmes offered in Nigeria’s tertiary institutions of learning as a mandatory course of study.

### **Concept of education**

There are several definitions and explanations of what education should be, depending on who is commenting and for what purpose. However, Nwala (1985, p.242) gives a comprehensive explanation on the concept of education by stating that education in whatever form is a process where a person acquires most of his ideas, beliefs and attitudes including knowledge, skill and manners to solve problems to fulfill his possibilities. We can infer that education includes all the experiences and knowledge, both formal and informal, which an individual undergoes from birth until death. Therefore, whatever happens to a person in life’s journey constitutes that

persons education. In view of the foregoing fact, John Dewey sees education as “a continuous process of growth, having as its aim at every stage an added capacity for further growth (Orji 1986, P.2). It is imperative to point out that all aspects of education are very important but in the area of skill acquisition, the individual self-reliance and independent ability in terms of job creation is enhanced. As Rodney (1972, P.26) observed, education is crucial in any type of society for the preservation of lives of its members and the maintenance of the social change in all strata of society. Little wonder education is usually described as “Life itself”.

Similarly, the federal government of Nigeria through the national policy on education (2013, P.1) considers education as “an instrument for national development and social change”. It went further to view education as being able to “maximize the creative potentials and skills of the individual for self-fulfillment, general development and social change,” It proceeds to view education as being able to maximize the creative potentials and skills of the individual for self-fulfillment and general development of the society. Education becomes relevant when its beneficiaries become productive to themselves and competent in problem solving, rather than becoming liabilities and dependant on others. Musa and Jimba (2015, P.95) Opined that what is needed urgently in our economic distress is integrative education which would empower the people to be self-reliant through motivating them to harness and unleash their potentials, by promoting in them the ability of self-improvement and self-realization to survive in the midst of difficulties and challenges. In addition, Kosemani and Anuna (1996, P.126) see education as “a process of human growth through which individuals gain greater understanding and control over themselves and their world”. Here, education could be looked at as a process of building, developing and inculcating knowledge, skills and character moulding in individual beneficiaries.

However, functional education is in contrast with the concept of education. From the explanation of education in view of the foregoing, functional education is more encompassing, meaningful and desirable. It is regarded as a type of education that equips the recipient with knowledge and skills needed for the performance of productive task leading to development.

### **Functional education for poverty reeducation**

Functional education can be referred to as any education in which the ability to perform productive venture is more emphasized than the education that aims at producing theoretical conformity. In other words, it is a kind of education which lays more emphasis on practical than theory. Education for poverty reduction advocates functional and pragmatic education. Pragmatism as a philosophy is in line with the idea of functional education, due to its emphasis on practicality and workability which are driving forces for functional education. In this direction any education that does not make the beneficiaries to be self-reliant and useful to themselves, cannot be said to be functional. Accordingly, Agu in Aminigo and Osaat (2015, P.376) view functional education as a kind of education where individuals will be able to create enough power to enable them effectively participate in socio-economic life of their society, which will make them useful within and outside wherever they find themselves.

It is also important to point out that the human potential in a person will remain ineffective and out of use without education. Bringing the potentialities of the individuals is better utilized with

the help of education. In this regard, the federal government through the national policy on education (2013, P.4) realized that through education, functional skills and competencies of individuals are necessary for self-reliance, and therefore makes the individual economically useful and less dependent on others for their daily living. With properly planned and well directed education, national goals can be accomplished.

Functional education has been a mirage in Nigeria, which is due to the over emphasis on theoretical and academic knowledge. The over emphasis on the acquisition of certificate rather than practical skills of individuals has resulted to a dysfunctional education where our educational institutions continuously turn out graduates year in year out, without adequate knowledge and skills to engage in productive ventures.

However, functional education has exposed the fact that education has the ability to lift an individual from poverty and to put their activities to productive use. Education is not just needed to eradicate poverty, but it is necessary for wealth creation. This suggests that through education people can deal critically and creatively with reality and able to participate in transforming their society. In order to show that lack of education increases the rate of poverty, the *Awake* magazine (2005, P.6) observed that, “In poor countries, the possibilities for education lag far behind, dooming children to life of poverty. This lack is reflected in literacy rates”. There is therefore the urgent need to combat poverty through a massive compulsory and mass education which should be functional. Due to the unquantifiable benefit of education to the individual and larger society, Plato advocated for mass education which should be a matter of state concern. His aim was to use education to pick men for various duties. Plato sought to choose men in terms of their abilities as discovered by a system of education. As Frost (1989 P.211) maintained, Plato’s idea towards functional education was aimed at selection and training of men for service in the state, which is believed would produce an ideal society where everyone would be doing the work for which they are suited and trained. This is believed to make the citizens happy and independent, and lifting them from poverty. This is the reason every society has an aim or goal for education of its citizens. In fact, it is an important tool needed for life development which everyone needs to possess.

Furthermore, it is imperative to reiterate that the education of a child should be geared towards self-reliance, functionality and dignity of labour which was the focus of our traditional education. Accordingly, Babarinde and Saulawu (2015, P.99) stated that functionalism is aimed at the utility or usefulness of education to the individual and collective ends to match the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century where education is geared towards acquisition of knowledge, directed to the promotion of skills and technical capabilities for self-reliance.

### **Concept of poverty**

Poverty according to the new Webster’s Dictionary (2004, P.786) is defined as, “the condition or quality of being poor, unproductiveness, deficiency in or inadequate supply of something”. To understand in-depth what poverty entails, the United Nations (UN) explains it to be a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information. It depends not only on income but also on access to services (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008, P.214). The

above explanation has presented a precise meaning of the word poverty as lack of material resources, which is a major challenge facing Nigeria. A major instrument leading to poverty no doubt, is the issue of unemployment. It is believed that for the problem of poverty to be tackled and reduced to the barest minimum there will be need to develop skills and manpower in the individuals through functional education to promote self-reliance and economic development. Focus should be directed to education that would emphasize on developing individuals who will help in the socio-economic transformation of their society. Nigeria's education should be geared towards economic development of the country.

Consequently, to understand better the concept of poverty, it is necessary to review the historical background of the link between education which the colonial officials introduced and rate of poverty. In view of this fact, Rodney (1972, P. 262) Stated that, the most crucial aspect of pre-colonial African education was its relevance to Africans in sharp contrast with what was later introduced. This is due to the separation of education and production activity which was prevalent in the colonial model of education. Similarly, the colonial education affected the entrepreneurial spirit of self-reliance and productive capacity inherent in the traditional education they met, which was functional. There is no disputing the fact that the colonial education was more theoretical and less pragmatic in skill acquisition. Nigeria's economic problem was worsened due to lack of skill which beneficiaries of our education portrayed. As Agu in Aminigo and Osaat (2015, P.369) observed, the population growth rate is higher than the available jobs visible for graduates. This has led to a situation where unemployment has skyrocketed posing a social menace, which has affected Nigeria for more than two decades. It is no longer news that this present state of affairs has increased the level of poverty amongst Nigerian youths astronomically.

### **Reduction of poverty through functional education**

Every country attempts to make her citizens productive through various programmes. This is because it serves the interest of a country more, when its members are productive through useful activities. Accordingly, Frost (1989, P. 225), maintains that education is concerned with the individual in society and not with the individual isolated from the society. In view of this fact, unproductivity of individual beneficiaries of education no doubt leads to some social problems for which poverty is the major result. Thus, the society should neither be ignored, nor should the child be educated in complete disregard of the positive values of society.

Furthermore, in making individuals productive in the society, Dewey argued that the best interest of the group will be best served as individuals develop their talents. Ani (2017, P.15) adds that Dewey's progressive educational idea is geared towards making individuals productive, through problem solving approach to learning. For him, learning should be an active process which should enable the learners to be involved in finding, than receiving information passively. In other words, there should not be any division between thought and action which could enable the individual to be an active participant or originator of meaning through problem solving. This in the long run has implications for education in Nigeria where the practice of education is more theoretical than practical, Consequently, most graduates are unable to practice the things they have learnt in school over the years to enable them engage in productive ventures.

However, due to the high rate of unemployment of graduates in Nigeria, the government at various levels initiated programmes such as skill acquisition and entrepreneurship schemes to make the citizens productive and active participants in the economic well-being of their society. Through these empowerment schemes, people have been known to escape the experience of poverty. In this direction, they have been empowered and their economic conditions lifted to a promising height. Empowerment in this sense means “enablement or capacity” which Aminigo and Osaat (2015, P. 374) described as a means of assisting people to overcome obstacles which might prevent them from achieving their potentials. But through entrepreneurship programmes either in the schools or outside the school settings, which is usually targeted at creating employment and enabling greater percentage of the citizens to be economically and socially active, rather than becoming dependent. This is the reason entrepreneurship programmes are usually initiated. In the light of this, Nwaiwu in Aminigo and Osaat (2015, P.376) maintained that entrepreneurship programmes function effectively in the society as stated below:

- a. Reduce unemployment by employing himself and others;
- b. Through his business/economic activities, the entrepreneur will be functioning effectively in the economic activities and growth of the society;
- c. Be able to pay taxes to the government thereby contributing to the government and other sector of the society revenue wise. With proper entrepreneurship, our nation will grow well economically, thus reducing poverty as well as be able to meet international demands.

### **The role of education in economic development, self-reliance and poverty reduction**

This paper deals with issues of poverty reduction which is an economic matter through education, it becomes imperative to highlight the role of education towards economic development. Accordingly, economic development of a country is largely determined by its human resource development which depends on the rate of literacy and quality of education given. In furtherance of the above facts, Ravi (2015, PP 483-484) examined and highlighted the roles of education in economic development as follows:

1. **Education as material wealth:** in this regard education produces a man more intelligent, more ready and more trustworthy in his or her ordinary work, it raises the tone of his or her life in working hours and out of working hours, which is an important means towards the production of material wealth.
2. **Education develops occupation skills:** here education is linked to having the ability of increasing the quality of manpower and develops occupational skills which could lead to increase in production and national development. In this way education determines the economic development of a country.
3. **Education is job-oriented:** There is no gain in disputing the fact that education guarantees some sort of employment to a person. Vocationalization is needed for job-oriented education. Vocationalization of education means making education job oriented and producing self-sufficient human beings.
4. **Education increases productive efficiency:** It is absolutely clear that education is an investment in the economic development of a country, which depends on the productive efficiency of individuals. Focus in education for productive efficiency can help to raise a



country above poverty line. It is the power of education that forces a country to move towards economic prosperity.

Therefore, to achieve the above, it becomes expedient for Nigeria's education system to lay more emphasis on vocational, technical and entrepreneurship education which has the possibility of enabling the citizens to be self-reliant, self-sufficient, creative and bold to engage them in self-employment not living out the intellectual and moral aspects of education as well. Entrepreneurship education when put into practice offers a greater possibility of achieving significant financial rewards to a person rather than working for others. It creates opportunity for people to make contributions toward the growth of the local economy. Most importantly, entrepreneurship is essential to the vitality of any economy, developed or developing (Okehi 2021, P.208). Due to the high level of unemployment among Nigerians, poverty has been on the increase to an alarming proportion. The need for self-reliance should become a major focus of all those who are concerned with education in Nigeria, due to its positive outcome.

Self-reliance therefore is seen as a situation where the individual would be able to function independently and effectively where ever they find themselves, without posing obstacle or hindrance to others. Other words that can be likened to being self-reliant include: independent, self-sufficiency, autonomy, resourcefulness, self-confidence, self-assurance, and others. The then 6-3-3-4 system of education was aimed at making the beneficiaries to be job creators, rather than job seekers. It is generally believed that there is a nexus between education and poverty reduction. The 6-3-3-4 system of education then, was as a system which can make the beneficiaries independent due to the vocational and technical skills they would have been exposed to. This is anchored on the belief that, "If a system cannot create jobs it becomes difficult to lift people out of poverty, but dependants and job seekers".

### **Curricular proposal by the federal government to achieve functional education**

The curriculum previously inherited by the British is rightly criticized due to its over-emphasis on examination system targeted towards employment in the civil service which has dominated parts of it aimed disproportionately at those capable of readily communicating facts and coping with theory to achieve functional education in Nigeria.

However, in line with the position of this paper on functional education, the National Policy on education (2013, pp 12-39) in order to achieve functional education for skill acquisition, job creation and poverty alleviation necessary for self-reliance, the following are aimed at, in the various levels of education;

- i. **Primary and Basic Education Level:** One of the objectives is to provide opportunities for the child to develop life manipulative skills that will enable that child function effectively in the society within the limits of the child's capability. In addition, at the junior secondary education, its main trained that the child would be exposed to diverse basic knowledge and skills for entrepreneurship and educational advancement.
- ii. **Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET):** This is geared towards training to impart the necessary skills to individuals for self-reliance economically.
- iii. **Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education:** The federal government maintains that to give education outside the formal school system focuses on provision

- of in-service, vocational and professional training for different categories of workers and professionals in order to improve their skills.
- iv. **Nomadic Education:** The federal government proposes that one of the goals of nomadic education is aimed towards improving the survival skills of the nomadic through providing them with knowledge and skills that will enable them raise their productivity and level of income to participate effectively in the nations socio-economic and political affairs.
  - v. **Tertiary Education:** One of the goals of tertiary education to make the beneficiaries functional is to reduce skill shortages through the production of skilled manpower relevant to the needs of the labour market.

Furthermore, with productive skills at the disposal of the citizens, the economy will be better for it. These acquired skills can be automatically transformed to wealth creation. In this regard therefore, Musa and Jimba (2015, P.95) stated that “there is an increasing emphasis on the need for technical and vocational education training at the secondary school level.” This is because, this form of education prepares the individuals for gainful employment, through the acquisition of attitude, understanding and knowledge in addition to practical skills relating to occupation in other areas of the economy, to improve social life. As Taneja (2010, p.27) points out, the need for education to promote vocational skills is to escape the scourge of poverty. He believes that since the primary needs of man are food shelter and clothing. If education does not enable us to provide these, all other ideals of education are useless. Education should therefore enable a person to earn a living so as not to be parasite on others. The economic need of man cannot be down played, this is because it is the economic self-sufficiency of an individual that makes him worthy citizen to be able to be economic independent and socially competent in the mixed of others.

The general belief is that education apart from other aims should enable the individual to be economically viable and useful so as not to be liability on others. The individual is usually regarded rightly or wrongly, as someone who is able to make ends meet as an adult member of the society after years of acquiring education. It is also believed that the knowledge which a child/leader acquires as a result of education should be a tool for earning decent living in later life.

It is however necessary to note that education should be geared towards living and for livelihood which a functional education provides. It is clear that, while we uphold technical and vocational education due to the inherent skills that an individual could acquire, leading to job creation, it would therefore amount to mockery of what we consider as education, if the beneficiaries fail to combine expertise in their chosen field with good character and also apply same for the general good of the society where they reside. In other words, the moral aspect of education (the affective domain) is as well important just like the intellectual and skill aspect.

## Conclusion

Education has been considered as a veritable instrument for economic development. Apart from intellectual and moral exposure of individuals through education, skills are promoted which help in the people’s well-being and undoubtedly have the possibility of lifting them out of

poverty. Like the saying goes, “education is the seed and the flower of economic growth”. The major problem in this direction is that Nigeria’s education system tends to focus more on intellectual development far and above skills growth. The reason is not far-fetched, but traceable to the foundation laid by the British colonial officials reflected in the type of education they handed over to Nigeria before independence in 1960. There was a disconnect between the type of education they operated and skill development in the learners. This condition increased the high level of unemployment in Nigeria. This is because our education system, still bear traces of the colonial model even after independence. Again, the low percentage of money allocated to education due to corruption and mismanagement of financial resources by our political leaders is a major factor that sky-rocketed the rate of unemployment amongst Nigerian youths leading to social vices of various forms as presently witnessed. The truth also remains that, there is no way government alone can provide employment for every person (graduates) who are product of Nigeria’s education.

it can be adduced that there is a symbiotic relationship between functional education and poverty alleviation.

### **Recommendation**

1. Nigeria’s education system should emphasize skill development through technical and vocational education. There should be synergy between theory and practice.
2. The government should establish some special entrepreneurship tertiary institutions that will concentrate in training citizens for skill acquisition and creativity.
3. Since government alone cannot provide employment for all persons who need jobs, the citizens themselves should cultivate the habit of pursuing entrepreneurial skills in order to be able to fend for themselves than depending on white collar jobs which are non-existent.
4. Parents on their part should develop skill consciousness in their children at an early age. This could in the long run help their children to survive through the skills they have acquired in their young age.
5. The 6-3-3-4 system of education which was abandoned is a very important programme for skills development. It was targeted at making the beneficiaries self-reliant and job creators. The system should be reconsidered and made more functional.
6. The budget for education should be lifted up. A situation where the budget for education is less than 3% of the country’s total budget is unacceptable.
7. Teachers in our institutions of learning should be taken care of by way of prompt payment of their salaries and other entitlements. This is because no matter how laudable an education system may be and no matter how well equipped the educational institutions may be, not much will be achieved in the absence of adequate trained and motivated work force. It is usually said, that no nation can rise above the quality of its teachers.
8. All levels of government in Nigeria, should promote functional education through funding, policy making, supervision and monitoring of education projects and programmes.

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