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Equal Education Opportunity and Self-Reliance: The Nigerian Experience

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Abstract

Education in Nigeria is based on a national philosophy of education. This philosophy is based on the assumption that the individual has self-worth and that the education system should regard the worth and dignity of the human person; inculcate moral and spiritual principles in him, inter-personal and human relations, promote the physical, emotional and psychological development of all children and ensure the acquisition of the necessary competencies for self-reliance. These principles are the building blocks for self-reliance. This paper seeks to examine how equal educational opportunity can give rise to self-reliance. It does this by clarifying the concepts of equal educational opportunity and self-reliance. The paper opines that self-reliant education became necessary following the deficiencies of the missionary/colonial education that laid emphasis on literary education to the near total exclusion of the acquisition of relevant skills for self-reliance. While discussing the role of education in achieving self-reliance, the paper outlines the efforts made so far to equalize educational opportunity in Nigeria. The paper highlights some problems which may be encountered in the self-reliance endeavour such as imported equipment, examination malpractice and poor philosophical stand of the Nigerian education system. It is therefore, concluded that if Nigeria must realize self-reliant education through the instrumentality of equal educational opportunity, its policy on education must be constantly reviewed and restructured in line with the needs of Nigerian society.

Keywords: Equality, Educational Opportunity, Self-reliance, Creativity, and Self-direction.

Introduction

Education is a veritable instrument for national development. The quantity and quality of education are important determinants of a nation's stock of manpower resources which can be injected into the nation for the production of all classes of goods and services for the consumption of its citizens and for boosting its standard of living. In spite of the obvious advantages of formal education in guaranteeing economic self-sufficiency and political stability of both developing and developed nations of the world, so many countries especially the developing nations of the world are characterized by high level of illiteracy and unemployment bedeviling the nation.

According to the Federal Government of Nigeria (2014), Nigeria is committed to living in unity and harmony as one indivisible, indissoluble, democratic and sovereign nation founded the principles of freedom, equality and justice. Nigeria's philosophy of education is based on:

1. The development of the individual into a sound and effective citizen;
2. The full integration of the individual into the community; and
3. The provision of equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens of the country at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels both inside and outside the formal school system (FRN, 2014).

This paper therefore, discusses the concept of equal educational opportunity in Nigeria and the promotion of self-reliant economy. To do this successfully, the paper is divided into three significant sections. Section one discusses the genesis of educational imbalance which gave rise to the need for equal educational opportunity in Nigeria. Section two discusses the effects of educational imbalance and the efforts made so far in mitigating the ugly consequences of the imbalance while section three harps on the need for equal educational opportunity as a solution for self-reliant education in Nigeria.

Concept of Equal Educational Opportunity

Equality as a concept is nebulous and therefore is not capable of a consensus definition. However, equal educational opportunity as it is used here refers to the condition whereby all stakeholders in education are given equal and fair chances of participating in education as may be deemed appropriate to them. This agrees with Bebebiafiai in Okere (2016) who maintained that the principle of equality recognizes that human beings should be treated differently if there are reasonable grounds for doing so. That is why, the Federal Government of Nigeria (2014), emphasizes equal educational outcomes in recognition of the differences existing between humans in such areas as social and family background, economic and political opportunities among others. Equality of educational opportunity therefore represents meritocracy in distributing educational and other social benefits in Nigeria and the reduction of barriers to national resources due to differences in social, economic and political backgrounds.

Concept of Self-Reliance

Self-reliance means self-knowledge and self-improvement. It recognizes the individual as a unique personality in his own right, who is capable of developing to his maximum potentialities for his own benefit and for contribution to his own society and beyond. Ocho in Bebebiafiai (2014), opined that self-reliance cuts across cultural, economic and political dimensions. For

him, self-reliance warrants that a nation should be inward-looking for most of her needs and should seek development from her human and material endowment. It is a development strategy that recognizes the role of indigenous technology, indigenous resources and inward-looking political actors in steering the affairs of the nation to the benefit of us all. Ukeje in Okere (2015), reiterated that self-reliance connotes structural transformation in economic, social, cultural and intellectual endowments of human beings for their own growth and development and for contribution to the society.

Historical Overview of Educational Disparity and Self-Reliant Education in Nigeria

Uruakpa in Okere (2016) regarded educational disparity in Nigeria as a consequence of the British colonial administration and their educational policy which favoured the Southern part of Nigeria in contrast to their Northern counterparts. Uruakpa believed that the Northern Nigeria had embraced the Koranic and Islamic culture as far back as the 9th century. It was therefore, not attractive for them to accept the western type of education during the missionary period which started around (1842-1960). Adesina in Okere (2016) supported the view when he noted that before Lugard's amalgamation of Northern and Southern protectorates of Nigeria in 1914, there were more than 19,000 Koranic Schools with over 743,000 students in Northern Nigeria. It was this state of affairs that made western education unattractive to the North with its attendant Christianity as a form of religious worship.

Educational disparity between the North and South had implications for social, economic and political development between the two regions. First, it meant that educational development took place in the South more than the North. Second, the benefits of western education expanded educational development in Southern Nigeria and slowed down educational development in Northern Nigeria thus, making the South to play a leading role in education than their Northern counterparts.

Constitutional development in Nigeria during the missionary/colonial administration was another factor that added to educational disparity between North and South. The Arthur Richards constitution of (1946) introduced regionalization into Nigerian politics. There was thus, Northern, Eastern and Western regions each with the power of regional government and house of assembly. Macpherson constitution of (1951) equally facilitated the spate of regional government by introducing political parties based on ethnic lines and loyalties. In the East was the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroun's (NCNC) which later became the National Council of Nigerian Citizens under the leadership of the late Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the Action Group (AG) in the west was under the leadership of the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo and the Northern People's Congress (NPC) was under the leadership of the late Sarduna of Sokoto for Northern Nigeria. Macpherson constitution also, encouraged regional government to legislate on educational matters. Differences in population density and occupation between the various regions was also another factor responsible for educational disparity. The nature of spatial distribution of population in the North coupled with the nature of economic life was another factor that contributed to disparities between the North and the South.

The foregoing has implications for the Nigerian economy and the future of self-reliant education. Some of the efforts aimed at addressing the challenges in educational disparity was the federal character commission. According to the Federal Government of Nigeria (2014):

Federal character of Nigeria refers to the distinctive desire of the people of Nigeria to promote national unity, foster national loyalty and give citizens of Nigeria a sense of belonging to the nation. Notwithstanding the diversities of ethnic origin, culture, language or religion which may exist, and which it is their desire to nourish, harness to the enrichment to the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Federal character was reflected not only in educational matters but also in the social, economic, political and human resources of the country and as a means of geo-political balancing of the entities called Nigeria. Other measures included:

- Quota system of admission into institutions of higher learning;
- School of basic studies;
- Unity schools and colleges of education.

The quota system of admission is aimed at giving equal educational opportunity for higher studies in institutions of learning. It operates on the basis of catchment areas. According to Alabekee (2013) catchment area was an offshoot of the compensatory education policy aimed at addressing the uneven distribution of higher institutions across the states in Nigeria. He further stated that in the allocation of catchment areas to federal universities, those tagged educationally advantaged areas were allocated fewer universities than those tagged educationally disadvantaged. For example, “the university of Port-Harcourt served as catchment area to Rivers, Cross River, Imo and Anambra in the 1985/86 Jamb admission while the Ahmadu Bello University, (A.B.U) Zaria, served as catchment area to the ten Northern states then” (Uruakpa, 2007:61). The school of basic studies were established in the educationally disadvantaged states where students run remedial programmes for university admission. Unity schools and colleges of education were also established across the states of the federation as a way of balancing educational opportunities.

Self-Reliant Education in Retrospect

One of the prominent roles of education in society is the inculcation of knowledge, values and skills of diverse kinds for the survival of the individual and the society in which he lives. In extolling the values of education, Inyanya (2012) noted that education develops children’s self-confidence and initiative and imbues them with the desire for continued learning; developing social attitudes of co-operation, participation, integrity and hard work in students. He further stated that the above qualities of education can lead to creativity, resourcefulness and critical judgement. Okere (2015) has remarked that education is instrumental to innovations and inventions through which creative and imaginative potentials of the learners are facilitated in the educational process. He also stated that education gives the learners knowledge of themselves, their fellows and their environment; arguing that as social beings, education enables humans to become better members of the community.

Equal educational opportunity in Nigerian context was a child of necessity. It was an educational strategy to balance the disparities in educational opportunities consequent on the British colonial missionary education in Nigeria. Prior to the colonial administration in Nigeria

and other British West-African colonies such as Ghana, Gambia and Sierra-Leone, Nigeria was practicing traditional/indigenous education system. Indigenous education in Nigeria was based on traditional values system of self-reliance, skills-based learning, character training and respect for human persons and dignity of labour. African traditional education and precisely Nigerian traditional education reflected a significant aspect of self-reliance. Amaele and Okere (2016) noted that Nigerian indigenous education prepared and equipped the younger generation with the required knowledge, skills, mode of behaviour and beliefs for playing their roles in adult society. They further stated that indigenous education was aimed at adapting the younger generation to their physical environment and to teach them how to use and control it.

Equality, freedom and human dignity were guaranteed in indigenous education. Colonial education in Nigeria was based on administrative convenience. The western/missionary education in Nigeria was based on a philosophy of evangelizing the native people of Nigeria on one hand and on making them literate on the other hand. The curriculum of studies was based on the three 3Rs of reading, writing and arithmetic in addition to religious instruction. This education system produced catechists, church teachers, messengers and interpreters of the Bible meant for missionary education. The colonial education did not emphasize technical and vocational based education that could lay the foundation for self-reliant economy. Expressing the nature of this kind of education, Amaele (2015) noted that the colonial education had three basic objectives namely:

- (1) The production of low level manpower that served as interpreters, messengers, artisans and clerks;
- (2) The production of indigenous youths meant for agricultural production and;
- (3) The production of semi-literate citizens that could be absorbed as instruments for realizing the British philosophy of colonialism. This meant that the British colonial/missionary education did not lay the foundation for self-reliant education. It rather created opportunity for elitist education.

In another development, Nyerere in Okere (2015), decried the colonial education system when he remarked that the system inculcated attitudes of inequality, intellectual arrogance and intense individualism among the young people. He further stated that the educational system created a class of superior and inferior citizens whose education neglected the reality of agricultural life. What this meant is that the colonial education was divorced from real life situation of the Nigeria child. Nyerere was of the view that education should inculcate and reinforce the traditional African social system of values of equality, co-operativeness and self-reliance noting that the education system should equip the learners with practical and intellectual activities and to respect and make use of the accumulated wisdom of the past generations for societal progress.

Equal Educational Opportunity and Self-Reliant Education

Equal educational opportunity according to Bebebiafiai (2014) has the following characteristics:

1. Social justice in education;
2. Impartial treatment in educational opportunity;
3. Same treatment except on grounds of relevant criteria;

4. Sharing advantage and burden on a-one-to-one basis
5. Giving educational opportunities to everyone according to his or her ability and the endowed potentialities;
6. Recognizing individual differences in education.

The above mentioned characteristics are necessary for understanding the nature and meaning of equality of educational opportunities. To ensure equality in educational provisions, education must be democratized, free and available to all and should be provided in a wholistic and comprehensive manner so that each child shall have equal opportunity to develop to his fullest potentialities. It is in this manner that self-reliance can be actualized via the instrumentality of equal educational opportunity. Education is concerned with human development. It aims at developing the ennobling qualities of man such as: critical thinking, creativity, autonomy and self-direction.

The Nigerian philosophy of education has a leaning on self-reliant education. According to the Federal Government of Nigeria (2014) in National Policy on Education, the overall philosophy of Nigeria is to live in unity and harmony as one indivisible, indissoluble, democratic and sovereign nation founded on the principles of freedom, equality and justice. The philosophy has faith in developing the individual into a sound and efficient citizen; the full integration of the individual into the community; and the provision of equal access to educational opportunities for all Nigerian citizens at the various levels of the national educational system namely primary, secondary and tertiary levels.

This philosophy identifies five main objectives of Nigerian educational system. They include;

1. A free and democratic society;
2. A just and egalitarian society;
3. A united, strong and self-reliant nation;
4. A great and dynamic economy;
5. A land of bright opportunities for all citizens.

These objectives are geared towards equal and self-reliant education and it will enable each person perform most competently and most efficiently the function of the division to which he belongs. A free and democratic society is necessary for educating for self-reliance. For education to be equal, it must be seen to be free, universal and compulsory. Freedom in education encompasses social, economic and political aspect to mention but a few. Justice and egalitarianism are overlapping values. They are procedural values for sharing national resources, for the reconciliation of divergent interests and for securing harmony and peace among conflicting interests and interest groups; (Akinpelu, 2015). A united, strong and self-reliant nation is emphasized in the national aspiration. This ideal is necessary for rapid and sustainable democratic Nigeria. Dzurgba (2007) is of the view that the unity of a country does not mean that such a nation has citizens of the same racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, social and economic characteristics. To actualize equal educational opportunity and unity in Nigeria, the school should emphasize citizenship education, social studies and Nigerian history to mention a few. Self-reliant education should distil skills for engaging in agricultural and

industrial production, science and technological equipment and vocational studies so that Nigerian graduates from institutions of higher learning can be self-reliant.

The educational goals that derive from the Nigerian philosophy of education are: -

- a. The inculcation of national consciousness and national unity;
- b. The inculcation of the right type of values and attitudes for the survival of the individuals and the Nigerian society;
- c. Training the mind in the understanding of the world and;
- d. The acquisition of appropriate skills and the development of mental, physical and social abilities and competencies for the individual development and contribution to his society.

From the foregoing philosophy of Nigerian education, it is hoped that education will inject the necessary skills and abilities to produce a self-reliant society. National unity was viewed as a serious ingredient of building a united Nigeria without which progress in human development would not be achieved. Development of individual abilities and skills would produce individual's initiative, creativity, and skills for engaging in technical and technological production. This would ensure self-reliance. It would also ensure the development of the three domains in education which include the cognitive, the affective and the psychomotor perspectives. The Nigerian education system has at the various levels of primary, secondary and tertiary education tried to ensure equal educational opportunity and self-reliance. The 6-3-3-4 educational system that was introduced in 1982 was aimed at inculcating the spirit of inquiry and creativity in the Nigerian child at the pre-primary school level. At the primary level of education, the development of scientific and reflective thinking was emphasized. It also stressed the provision of basic tools for educational development and the preparation for trades and crafts of Nigerian environment. Secondary education was sub-divided into Junior Secondary School (J.S.S) and Senior Secondary School (S.S.S). The secondary education aimed at the following objectives:

- a. Providing opportunities for higher education irrespective of social, political, economic or ethnic background;
- b. Cater for differences in talents, opportunities and roles open to students after secondary education;
- c. Equip students for effective participation in the modern world of science and technology;
- d. Raise students who are capable of independent thinking, appreciate dignity of labour, value the opinions by other people and;
- e. Inspire students with a desire for achievement and self-development.

The educational system equally provided the following objectives at the higher level. They include:

- a. The development of the intellectual capacity of students to appreciate their environment;
- b. The acquisition of both physical and intellectual skills for becoming useful members of the community and;

- c. The acquisition of proper value systems for individuals and societal development. Nwosu (2013) noted that education should be functional in order to guarantee employment opportunities. He further stated that fundamental human rights of personal liberty, individual and political freedom and consensus in decision-making through consultation must be recognized arguing that the school system should be re-organized to make it resilient to self-reliance, dignity of labour and more egalitarian in nature.

The Nigerian government in 1999, introduced the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme. This programme came on the heels of the UNESCO programme of Education for All (EFA), UNICEF (2020). The UBE programme guarantees intellectual autonomy, integration into community life and development of the Nigerian economy through the provision of saleable skills, vocational guidance, values and abilities that are critical for individual freedom and responsible adult-life. The universal basic education provides the opportunity for equal educational attainment and long-life education career irrespective of any real or imagined disabilities due to economic background, religion or ethnic considerations. According to the Federal Government of Nigeria (2014) in National Policy on Education, the structure of the UBE programme encompasses early childhood education, inculcation of life and functional literacy skills; special education programmes as well as other forms of non-formal education.

However, the Nigerian education system has not been able to guarantee self-reliant education. The education system has been described as dysfunctional due to its inability to address the critical challenges of unemployment, illiteracy, poverty and diseases among other problems.

Problems of Nigerian Education in Relation to self-Reliance

- Poor work attitude;
- Importation of foreign technology;
- Scarce human and material resources;
- No philosophy of education relevant to need;
- Prevalence of examination malpractice.

Poor work attitude is responsible for the high rate of unemployment and poverty in Nigeria. Most Nigerians prefer leisure to work. The get-rich-quick syndrome has taken over the psyche and mentality of the working class in Nigeria. Imported technology and equipment for production of most essential goods and services is taking a high toll on the expenditure of both the public and private enterprises in Nigeria. The result is high cost of manufactured goods and the lack of incentive to embark on self-enterprises. Also, scarcity of technical teachers is affecting Nigeria's education seriously. Alabekee (2013) remarked that dearth of competent instructors in sciences related courses is affecting the nation's institutions of learning seriously.

The Nigerian philosophy of education has been described as a hybrid of Euro-American thinking about reality, knowledge and value. The multi-farious philosophies that underline the Nigerian educational thinking make the philosophy of Nigerian education a non-starter in educational philosophies. Okoh (2018) has argued that a philosophy of education should state

in a precise form what education ought to achieve for the nation concerned. Akinpelu (2015:45) noted that “a system of education is better directed and guided and effectively achieves its objectives if the philosophical basis is stated in clear terms for everybody to see”. He further stated that examination malpractice has put the nation’s education system dangerously too close to the mortuary. Amaele (2015) collaborates this view when he opined that discipline has broken down in schools and even in parental care. These issues and problems raise challenges for the educational sector.

Dewey in Okere (2018) has noted that education should aim at the progressive development of the individual in line with the realities of the present. This means an educational system that develops the individual to cope with the challenges of his everyday living. Dewey’s curriculum of studies places premium on individual differences. He stated that the curriculum of studies should be dynamic, suitable, comprehensive and adaptable to the aspirations of the individual and the society in which he belongs. Pragmatist philosophy recognizes the role of science and technology and practical work in engendering the spirit of creativity, critical intelligence and equal opportunity to participate in societal development based on the individual’s capacity and environmentally friendly education system.

Conclusion

Nigeria has an unambiguous stand for equal educational opportunity as a fillip to self-reliance. This was exemplified by the indigenous education system. However, this stand was dampened during the British missionary/colonial education which created the desire for white collar jobs without giving the clienteles the necessary skills and knowledge for their new roles in society. On the basis of the foregoing, the educational system in Nigeria should be overhauled to make it more responsive and adaptable to the demands for self-reliance. This necessitates providing educational opportunities of various kinds-science, technical, vocational and adult to all Nigerians inside and outside the formal school system.

Recommendations

1. Education should integrate the learner into his society.
2. Environmental education should be emphasized.
3. Book-learning curriculum should be de-emphasized.
4. Need for character building and desirable work attitude to form educational curriculum.
5. Education must reinforce traditional values of equality, co-operativeness and self-reliance.
6. Education should lead to commitment to the total community.
7. Practical and intellectual activities should be combined as an integrative educational system

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