

ACCESS TO EQUAL EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: HOW REALISTIC IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

Access to education in Nigeria is not really open to all segments of the population even though education is a fundamental right to all citizens irrespective of gender, sexuality, religion or place of location. The paper strongly believe that education being a vehicle for social mobility, equal access to this vital tool should be the primary responsibility of government as a social institution that provides educational services to all citizens irrespective of their socio-economic background and environmental location. It is therefore, the responsibility of local government education authorities working in tandem with religious organizations and other donor agencies to provide equal access to this basic service. The paper also looked at discrimination because of people with disability though, more recently, the notion of equality has emerged due to welfare disposition of modern government practices. Finally, this paper observe with great concern that government policy pertaining to education at a theoretical level is very sound and cogent but the implementation of the policies as it affect disadvantaged and disable groups in our society is yet to be translated into practical reality. Little wonder why equal access to basic education is still a far-cry from the expectation of the masses. Recommendations were also made to guide policy makers.

Background

The pursuit of sustainable human development through equal access to basic education as a fully democratic and participatory process, involving strategic, long-term perspective in human development cannot be over stated. Equal access to education in Nigeria has not been very realistic over the years especially as it concerns vulnerable groups and disadvantage people such as migrant fisher men, nomadic cattle men and special education. Education being a vehicle for social mobility is a vital tool that shape and reshape society. Equal access to this vital tool should be the primary responsibility of government as a social institution that provides educational services to its citizens irrespective of social background and environmental location (Osokoya 1987). This is because no nation strives well without quality education and equal access to it, hence developed and developing nations spend substantial part of their resources in providing basic education to all ability groups.

This becomes incumbent upon the government especially the local education authorities to make education accessible for all children who are 'of compulsory school age'. The local education authority must also find school for young people aged 16 to 19 who may be desirous to attend one. For instance, if a child of compulsory school age cannot receive basic education at school, the local education authority has a duty to provide suitable education in some other way, such as working with religious organizations and other donor agencies to provide equal access to basic education (Oyajobi, 1989). The duty of the local education authority to provide full-time education applies to all pupils including those who have special educational needs (Tomlinson, 1981).

In practice, those who have such needs are supposed to be in special schools, and other mainstream special centers, where inclusive education with unimpeded access for special needs children are provided. The irony though is that up till 1996, most children with special needs do not

get into the settings for early childhood stimulation until after they are five or six if their parents are aware of centers where their children with special needs can be taught in schools (Shonibare, 1996). Outside Nigeria, the moves by Mittler and Mittler (1983) and McConkey (1986) to push into the limelight the pace of parents in the early childhood stimulation of their children with special need were being discussed and clarified practically. These moves can be well understood if one realized that parents are the first custodians of special need children. In practice, they have the responsibility to care extensively before any functional schooling can start. But in Nigeria if one would ask how many parents are aware of the provision of access to special school talk-less of joining their children into main stream classrooms to compete with regular school children.

In view of the above, the need to equip parents by stimulating them for the task of early childhood stimulation before the age of five has become important since access to education will be pioneered by them (parents) at least in the preliminary level. Fortunately, the importance of these years as a period of readiness is clear to all. These notwithstanding most parents are not prepared for this task because of ignorance, social stigma and poverty thereby making a possible nonsense of the need for these children. Still, however, some other issues such as human rights, equality and human dignity are beginning to create the needed empowerment for parents in this area of access to basic education where social and human rights activist have championed the course of the education of the underprivileged who are hitherto denied of the opportunity to access basic education on the basis of equality as citizens (Akinkugbe, 1994). These issues are the pre-occupation of this paper arguing from the position of their fundamental human right and not on the basis that access to education is a privilege.

Local education authorities therefore, are public bodies that have legal responsibility not to discriminate against any body irrespective of socio-economic background and to promote equal opportunities. If for any reason a child is being discriminated against because of race, sex, sexuality or religion or place of location, the parents and guidance should take further action to restore the right of the child who is being discriminated against through legal means (Human Rights Commission, 1986). In Nigeria, this also applies to discrimination because of disability even though more recently, the notion of equality has emerged due to the welfare disposition of modern government practice every where. But doe that guarantee equal access to education for every body? Of course not, Government policy pertaining to education at a theoretical level is very sound and cogent but implementation of the policy as it affects these aforementioned groups is yet to be translated into practical reality. That is why access to basic education is still a far-cry from the expectation of the masses. For-instance, in Rivers State education of physically challenged persons and other people with various degrees of disability is far from achieving its target. The official institution for this category of persons is only and it is located in Port Harcourt without residential facilities so one wonders what become of those people who live outside Port Harcourt. Are those people not to be education? How then can they now have access to basic education? Main while, Rivers State has 23 Local Government Council Areas with the responsibility of providing basic education to the teaming masses which statutorily it is doing but the coverage to accommodate all segments of people is grossly inadequate. This is not only reminiscent of Rivers State alone it appears to be a common phenomenon all over Nigeria. Since it is only one institution that takes care of special educational needs of vulnerable people, it means that people outside the periphery of Port Harcourt and other centers where such institutions are located will automatically be denied access to basic education. Education being a catalyst for social mobility will invariably stunt their position from moving upwards socially since they are being denied access (Dokubo, 2003).

Consequently, education has not been well accessible to the children of migrant fishermen and nomadic cattle herdsman because of the nature of their occupation and the place of their location (Obanya, 2002), even though the National Policy Paper on Education is replete with the provision of educational services to this category of people who are in need of it. But practically, accessing education to these people is yet to be actualized due to government lack of funding migrant fishermen and nomadic education. For example in riverine communities in Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers State whose occupation is predominately fishing with hundreds of thousands of isolated island where fishermen occupy, there are no means of accessing basic education to the children of migrant fishermen. This situation could be applicable also to the children of nomadic herdsman who are always on the move from one location to another as a result of their occupation. Thus if the local councils primary responsibility is to make education accessible, the central and state government need to strengthen the capability of the councils to make possible the infrastructure needed to take educational services to the grass roots where the greater number of the people are domiciled. Through this means, education will then be accessible to people on the basis of equality without discrimination in regard to their place of location. In addition to this legal and social responsibility not to discriminate, most government authorities have equality in policies that cover other areas of discrimination. For example, many say that they will not discriminate against pupils who are being looked after by the orphanage or who have HIV. It may be helpful to get hold of a copy of ministry of education's equality policy if one encounters these sorts of problems (Fulcher, 1989). One should be able to take action to make the authorities keep to their stated policy.

Duties and Responsibilities of Parents on Access to Equality in Education

As parents, we have a duty to make sure that our children receive education during the compulsory school age years. Parents in this context, means either both parents, or the pupil's guardian or another person who has parental responsibility for the child (Warnock 1978). In some other circumstances, this means that a child may have one, or two more parents with a say in their schooling. From the age of 18 and below the responsibility for education falls squarely on the parents.

As parents if we do not carry out our duty in relation to our children's education, there are a number of measures that can be taken to make sure that we carry them out. This could include taking legal action against any body or authority that denies our children the opportunity to access education on the basis of equality. If for any reason a parent's face action by a local education authority or a court about their child's school attendance, they should consult an experienced guidance counselor to help advise the child on the importance of education to himself or herself and to the society at large.

In Nigeria, most local education authorities have a policy of accepting children into school at the beginning of the term during which the child becomes five. However, the child does not have to attend school until the beginning of the term following their fifth birthday (Omojuwa, 1984). Also, a child who is four years old on or before the school year must start primary schools on that year (Taiwo, 1982).

A pupil of compulsory school age, who is registered at a school, stays on the school register until their leaving date. If a pupil leaves school before that date, this may be considered taking unauthorized absence or truancy (Ogundipe, 1989). The school may not take any legal action but this will appear on the pupil's school record and could affect his/her future career choices.

In Nigeria, every three-year-old and four-year-old is entitled to a free early education through the Universal Basic Education (UBE). This is only if the parents want to take up a place for their children. The place should be for at least two and a half hours a day, for five days a week during normal term.

Not all nurseries schools or playgroups take part in the scheme to provide free early education. Many local education authorities hold lists of places which provide early education. The places may be in nursery schools, nursery classes in primary schools or reception classes in primary schools. Other places may be in playgroups, private day nurseries, independent schools, or with child minders or caregivers who belong to an approved network (Eweniyi & Sotonade, 1989). Even if the place would normally charge fees, you will not have to pay for at least two and a half hours a day. However, if your child attends for longer than that, you may have to pay for extra hours.

In Nigeria, many three-year-olds or four-year-olds are entitled to a pre-school education place (Oyajobi, 1989). The availability of places varies from area to area and parents are encouraged to apply if they wish to take up a place for their child. If free places are not available, they may have to pay for a place, but if a centre has enough free places, all eligible children whose parents apply will be given a place. Schools and groups in the scheme will provide information about how to apply for a place and about the education they offer (Sofolahan, 1992).

If for any reason a parent cannot find a suitable place offering free early education, one should contact their local education authority. For all other problems with free early education, the parent should contact the organization involved e.g. the local government education authority.

Children with Special Educational Needs

A pupil with special educational needs is defined as a pupil who:

- ❖ Has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of pupils of their age, or
- ❖ Has a disability which means that they cannot make full use of the general educational facilities for pupils of their age.

In Nigeria particularly in the South a pupil with special education need is entitled to receive full-time education that is appropriate to their needs at the level of policy but not in practical terms. This applies to children and young people between the ages of two to nineteen. This may be in a special school or a mainstream school, or somewhere else. Parents have the right to educate their children at home as long as this meets their child's needs and as approved by the education authorities.

In Nigeria, it may be against the law for a local education authority to discriminate against a pupil. This is because a child with special educational needs would usually be counted as a disable pupil and disability discrimination is against the law, though theoretically. For example, a school must make reasonable adjustments to allow for a pupil's disability in a bid to access equal education. However, not all pupils with special educational needs count as disabled pupils (Shonibare 1985).

In Nigeria, the local education authority does not have to provide full-time education to children with special educational needs until the age of five. If they think it would be appropriate, they can place children with statement of special educational needs in pre-school education which meets their needs (MacConkey 1985). However, not all children with a statement will get a free school place. Local education authorities have a duty to promote the education of children over five with special educational needs in mainstream school alongside other children. The rules about disability discrimination do not apply to every school especially those run by missionaries and voluntary agencies.

Educational Access to Children who are Too Ill to Attend School

If a child of compulsory school age cannot attend school because of sickness or injury, the local education authority must arrange suitable education for them. Some of these children will receive education in hospital schools or hospital teaching units, and some will receive tuition at home

but the state should provide financial assistance to parents of their affected children. A child who is admitted to hospital should have their educational needs assessed as soon as is reasonable after admission (Galloway & Goodwin 1987). They should be given tuition as soon as their condition allows. Children should not be home unwell for more than three weeks without home tuition. If a child is absent from school for less time, the school is expected to provide work for the child to do at home.

In Nigeria, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) has guidance on the education of sick children. It is called Access to Education for children and young people with medical needs. If a child can get guidance from the counseling unit in the department of special education from the ministry of education. Parents should seek assistance also from other voluntary agencies that are supportive to the course of equal access to basic education. In developed societies schools must not treat disabled pupils less favourably than children who are not disabled. They must also make reasonable adjustments to take account of the pupils' disability. This should apply both to current pupils and prospective pupils.

Pupils who have been Permanently Excluded (Expelled) from School

If a pupil is permanently excluded or (expelled) from a school, due to any reason the local education authority has a duty to provide other suitable educational opportunities for them in other that they may still have access to basic education. This may be a place in another school or a place in a local special educational unit. Or they could provide home or individual tuition in a supportive capacity for basis of equality to education. If a parent wants their child to go back to the same school, they should have a right to appeal against their child's exclusion which is fundamental to right of the child.

If for any reason a child is denied access to basic education as a result of misdemeanor, the parents can arrange education out of school for their child as long as such education meets the requirement of the school curriculum. Although one does not have to tell the local education authority that they are educating their children at home. There is the possibility that they may make enquiries to find out what education you are providing since the state has a compulsory educational policy. They have a duty to take action if it comes to their attention that a child in their area is not getting suitable education (Odewunmi, 1997).

He further stressed that if one is educating a child at home, one do not have to keep to school hours or follow the national curriculum. However, you must be able to show that your child's education is 'efficient'. This must take into account your child's age, ability, and any special educational needs your child has. He concluded that if the local education authority believes that you are not providing suitable education, they may decide to take action against the parent. The authority may decide to take action against any parent, either legal or executive sanction.

Conclusion

Access to education in Nigeria is not really open to all segments of the population even though education is a fundamental right to all citizens irrespective of gender, sexuality, religion or place of location. When the volume of regular school enrolment is viewed along side with the intake of other category of disadvantaged learners. It is very obvious that the graph for the enrolment of pupils is grossly skewed against disadvantaged groups such as the physically challenged, children of migrant fishermen as well as children of nomadic herd's men. Although government at the state local level are financing education particularly the basic education through the UBE scheme inclusive education that cut across all segment of the population has not been properly addressed. This is very

glaring in the sense that special education has never been given its pride of place in the scheme of things as it has been highlighted in the body of this paper with a clear reference to the Rivers State Government establishment of only one special school for the handicap which does have residential facilities for pupils who may be faraway from Port Harcourt where the school is situated. It is therefore imperative for the authorities particularly at the local council level to establish schools of such nature to widen the access base of students who may not be opportune to be in Port Harcourt to attend school because it is a fundamental human right to educate all and sundry irrespective of their location, background and social stratification.

Recommendations

The following recommendation were made:

1. Government at all levels are encouraged to provide free access to education to its citizens as a matter of right.
2. Government should legislate or enact laws that will make education accessible to its citizens.
3. Religious and other donor agencies should partners with government to provide education to every citizen irrespective of social status of parents, disability and or environmental location.
4. Parents who fail to send their children to school should be prosecuted.
5. Discrimination against a child due to race, sex, religion, disability or place of location should be prohibited.
6. Special needs education centres and gifted schools should be established and properly funded by government.

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