

# EMPHASIZING CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SECTOR AS A MAJOR INSTRUMENT FOR SELF-RELIANCE AND SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC GROWTH IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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## **Abstract**

After 52 years of independence, Nigeria with her vast human and natural resources is still far below her people's expectations and aspirations with regard to her economic and socio-political performance. The problem seems to lie with the mindset of the people and their general low regards for the value system. Since education is a medium of transformation, emphasis on character development in Nigeria educational system will provide the students with high standard of behavior, for making decisions that are personally empowering and creating quality relationship among the people. This will bring a paradigm shift in the mindset of the people especially the Nigerian graduates who hopefully are the leaders of tomorrow. Thus, this paper emphasizes character development in the Nigerian educational sector as a major instrument for self-reliance and sustainable economic growth in the 21st century.

At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the contemporary world was in the midst of profound and fundamental changes in economy, technology, politics, culture, moral, and social values and even ethics. The phenomenon of education was the driving force for these changes. Education is a multidimensional process of transformation whose defining feature is the effective interaction that it generates between an individual and his society.

Education can be defined as a process of relating the individual to society so as to secure the development of personality and social welfare. It can also be seen as a process of remaking or transforming the quality of experience to enable the individual partake in the interest, purposes and ideas current in the social group (Dewey, 1966). Basically, education is a process of harmonizing the individual with a given environment in such a manner as to enable him to develop his physical, mental, emotional and volitional capacities for the happiness and welfare of all. This implies that, quality education is not only geared towards the intellect, but also towards attitudes, behaviours and disposition. It emphasizes all aspects of the self and domains of learning – the cognitive, affective and behavioural.

Character development encompasses all these domains of learning. It supports academic achievements and at its best develops a whole person. Character development strives for an ever growing depth of self-awareness, self-discipline and social understanding.

In fact, education at its best is essentially education for character. Walsh (1990) and Hunthz (1997) identify character development as one of the major dimensions of education. Amosu in Kolade (2001) opines that the future of a nation and indeed any enterprise is guaranteed by its succession plan through its young men and women who must be developed in intellect and character. This suggests that school graduates should have not just academic achievement but also be groomed in character.

Nigeria is a very populous nation in Africa. She is endowed with vast human and natural resources including oil and gas. Yet after several years of independence, Nigerians are unanimous in their conviction that the economic and socio-political performance of their nation is far below her potential and their own expectations and aspirations. This is evidenced in our economic instability, high dependence on foreign products, which is as a result of our low regards for locally manufactured goods, high tolerance for inefficiency, robbery and other corrupt practices (such as examination malpractices, adulteration of goods and services, secret cultism, etc) which are rampart both in our educational and economic systems.

The problem seems to lie with the mindset of our people especially our innumerable school graduates who roam about the streets with their certificates as if certificate is an end in itself, and our general low regard for our value system. Respect, honesty, industry and integrity are being trampled upon by many Nigerians who do not care about what happens around them. Since education is a medium of transformation, Nigeria among all that she is doing needs to emphasize character development in Nigerian educational sectors. This hopefully will bring paradigm shift in the mindset

of all Nigerians especially our school graduates and thus enable us imbibe new core values, norms and standards that would align with the requirements of the global realities. This calls for a change in the way we Nigerians perceive and go about the world around us.

Therefore, for Nigeria to meet the vision of the 21st century, her educational sector should have a serious focus on character development as a major instrument to self-reliance and sustainable economic growth.

### **The Concept of Character**

Character refers to an evaluation of an individual's durable moral qualities. The concept of character comprises a variety of attributes including the existence or lack of virtues such as respect, integrity, courage, fortitude, honesty, loyalty and good behaviours or habits. Character simply describes the complex mental and ethical traits marking a person. It is who we really are – the accumulation of thoughts, values, words and actions. A person's character includes both the desirable and the undesirable qualities that make up the individual. The desirable qualities are called good character while the undesirable qualities are called bad character. A person of good character thinks right and does right according to the core universal values that define the qualities of a good person – trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship. These qualities are ethical values that are not political, religious or culturally biased. Lack of these virtues or qualities in an individual marks a bad person and such gives rise to social vices that pervade our schools and the entire economic system.

Moral character is a term used in many educational systems to indicate a strategy for the maturation of individual student. Pervin (1994) defined moral character as a disposition to express behaviour in consistent patterns of functions across a range of situations. This implies our tendency to behave in a consistent manner in varying situations. The definition suggests that an individual can be described with a particular set of qualities that are relatively stable in his/her behaviour.

On the whole, character describes what a person really is. It involves the inclination to express stable personal qualities in an individual. Character is not seen but inferred from actions. Therefore, good or bad character is considered to be observable in our conducts. Character is an integral part of an individual's personality. In fact a person's character gives a rough outline of the content the individual is made up of.

### **Character Development in Nigerian Educational Sector**

Character development is the deliberate effort to nurture the universal attributes upon which communities agree. These attributes namely: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship reflect a forged consensus on the beliefs and values of families and communities. They transcend socioeconomic, racial, religious, cultural, gender, and other factors that divide people and communities. They are the qualities that define a good person in and outside his environs. Character development in the educational sector borders on nurturing the best of the human and universal qualities, which a school graduate needs to be successful in school and in life. It means preparing students to be concerned citizens who have empathy and respect for people within their increasingly diverse communities. It means providing opportunities for students to understand deeply the importance of civic engagement and what it means to be global citizens in an increasingly interdependent global community.

Students' success, however, is multi-dimensional. In addition to academic success, any good school system should work towards the need to develop character and prepare students for their role in society as engaged, productive and responsible participants. In this case, to be engaged means deliberate efforts to nurture democratic ideas, that have to do with respect for self, others, property, the environment, diversity, human rights and other qualities upon which people can find common ground as members of a given community. It involves being an active and responsible citizen. To be productive on the other hand, reflects one's ability to be useful to one's self and to others. That is one's contribution to the welfare of the society. A medical doctor who breaks the ethic of his profession by involving himself in activities that destroy lives instead of preserving them is not productive but destructive. Likewise a lawyer who goes about "picking up" quarrels and intimidating people because he feels he is learned is not civilized but crude. Both of them lack integrity, respect for self and others and can not be described as productive members of the society.

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People in this category can become “hungry” in life not because they do not have qualification (academic success) but because they lack skills for effective human relationship. Lack of skills for effective human relationship can lead to failure in one’s most cherished profession. This stems from one’s inability to keep or maintain healthy relationships with clients, friends, or even relations. Such people are designated wicked, untrustworthy and irresponsible.

Students are responsible members of the communities who will sustain the universal values that we espouse as a society. The educational sector should be safe and models of effective human relationship, where students learn about and put into practice qualities such as respect, responsibility, fairness and empathy. These will help them demonstrate self-discipline, take responsibility for their own behaviour and be able to get along well with others. They should learn about thoughtful and non-violent problem – resolution, and working cooperatively with others.

Furthermore, character development supports academic achievement. It provides students with tools for increasing academic excellence. There is a growing body of scientific evidence that character development is closely linked to academic achievement. Etzioni (1984) and Ginbury and Hanson (1986) reported that students who were self-disciplined, more religious, hardworking or valued learning score higher on achievement tests. These views suggest that characteristics such as respect, industry and empathy form the basis of interpersonal understanding and effective human relationship.

#### **Students’ Role in Character Development**

Students are at the centre of all that is done. They should believe in and be committed to their potentials to become better. According to Aristotle, good character is based on two naturally occurring psychological responses which most people experience without difficulty; our tendency to take pleasure in self-realizing activity and our tendency to form friendly feelings towards others under specific circumstances. Based on this view, virtually everyone is capable of becoming better and we are the ones responsible for actions that express (or could express) our characters. Moreover, character cannot be acquired passively. It must be developed through engagement and support by dialogue, reflection and action on the part of the learners and the school system. In character development at school, students play a pivotal role, and are actively engaged in their own learning and in the life of the school. Character development at its best permeate the entire life of the school as it is woven into politics, programmes, practices, procedures and interactions.

A very familiar exemplary programme for impacting moral character in educational sector is moral instruction. This programme was an integral part of Nigerian school curriculum for both primary and secondary schools. Here opportunities were provided for the students and the moral instructors to discuss and think about moral issues which teach set of values that the students are expected to learn. Character development programmes in general challenge students to think critically about their world, anticipate problems contribute to solutions and develop higher levels of social responsibilities, along with skills to mediate and resolve conflicts.

The Nigerian educational system is anchored to our value system. As we know, Nigeria is a multi-ethnic society, with a value system that derives from the diversity of its people and their different behaviours, religions and culture. The elements of this value system include respect for elders, honesty, accountability, cooperation, industry, discipline, self-confidence and moral courage. Over the years however, such value system has weekend. The Nigeria education system should strive to inculcate moral character which instils in children the right attitudes to life. Such effort is needed to restore the weakened value system which if neglected could wreck the entire nation. It will help to bring about the paradigm shift in the mindset of all Nigerians especially our school graduates who hopefully are the leaders of tomorrow. It is envisaged that with character education widely imparted in all Nigerian schools, the Nigeria people will re-discover themselves and revert to being industrious, God-conscious and God-fearing, caring, sincere, honest, accountable in their dealing with public trust and proud of their country and heritage. And this will bring about self-reliance. Self-reliance as advanced by this paper emphasizes **Confidence** to rely entirely on indigenous resources (both human and material) and institutions for our economic growth. When people of Nigeria turn honesty and industry to the realities of the day, the economy of the nation will become more stable and Nigeria will be able to sustain her large population with the fruits of her labour through her numerous natural resources.

### **Conclusion**

Character development will provide students with high standards of behaviour, for making decisions that are personally empowering and creating quality relationships among the people. Characters such as honesty, responsibility, integrity, initiative, adaptability and respect for diversity are important qualities needed in preparing students not only for the workplace, but also to function effectively in our diverse society and in global economy. Matured school graduates should demonstrate self-discipline that makes their lives, their communities and work-places the best that they could be.

It is envisaged that with character education widely imparted in all Nigerian schools, our educational system will be turning out graduates with better frame of minds and high regards for what the nation has. And this will surely pave way for self-reliance and sustainable economic growth in Nigeria.

### **Recommendations**

From the forgoing, this paper cannot be concluded without making some few recommendations that will enhance character development in educational sector.

1. Students should be engaged as active participants in the learning processes and provided with relevant programmes (such as sports, activities, moral instructions, guidance and counselling programmes, religious activities, and other extra curricula activities).
2. Students should be taught a given set of values and accompanying appropriate actions. These should be values agreed upon by the society, that are unchanging and that are applied equally appropriately in all situations.
3. Educational board should review the educational curriculum and ensure that character education becomes an integral part of the school curriculum.

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