

EQUALIZING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES: THE GOAL OF 2004 NATIONAL POLICY ON EDUCATION

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Abstract

In the Nigerian context, equal educational opportunity means eliminating all possible barriers that could hinder mass functional literacy education within the shortest possible time from the Nigerian Educational system. Equality in education in this paper is therefore, viewed in terms of equal access to formal and non-formal education as well as the provision of adequate educational facilities in all our institutions of learning. In this paper, we highlighted the historical evolution of the 2004 education policy document in Nigeria as well as the sections of the document dealing with equality in education. We analyzed the strategies adopted for implementing equality in education in the Nigerian school system as well as the challenges involved.

Introduction

The notion of 'equal opportunity' as an ideal is difficult to pin down to a single meaning. This is because it is difficult to identify an important human characteristic which all men possess in precisely the same degree. We may talk of equality in terms of "sameness". Two things are the same if one of them is a perfect substitute for the other. Mathematically, $10 \times 10 = 300$. The sign of equality in that mathematical expression indicates that the figure on the right is perfectly the same as those on the left of the equation. This is hardly applicable however, to human affairs for two persons can hardly ever be equal in that sense.

The literature does not offer much guidance on what equality in schooling should mean. Perhaps, the most explicit contribution is that made by Schiefelbein and Parrel (1980)- based on an earlier categorization by Levin (1976)- who distinguished four separate dimensions underlying equality:

- access - i.e. enrollment in school, or participation in schooling
- survival - i.e. completing a given educational cycle.
- « Output- i.e. levels of learning by gender
- « Outcome- i.e. job status or income level.

Most studies in education argue that equality in education refers to access or giving everyone the opportunity to receive education without making reference to survival, output or outcome. Other studies consider that access to facilities and services is not enough and that equality should also mean the likelihood of completing a given educational cycle. Fewer studies also hold that equality is reached when individuals obtain similar levels of knowledge and select occupation that are evenly distributed. Contributing to the debate on equality in education, Akinpelu (1991), distinguished between legal equality and social equality within the school setting and concluded that it is difficult if not impossible for students to turn out equally educated. It has been scientifically established that normal human beings who are taught, motivated to learn and are provided with conditions conducive to learning will learn up to or near the limits of their capacity. This again does not indicate equality in learning experience. From the arguments raised above, we are limiting the idea of equal educational opportunity as stipulated in the 2004 National Policy document in Nigeria to mean that children should enjoy equal treatment in the school setting regardless of gender, political or tribal affiliations of their parents as well as their socio-economic backgrounds. This involves making adequate educational provisions for all in terms of adequate staffing, adequate instructional materials and the same conducive environments for learning. It involves removing all possible barriers that could stand in any body's way of using the educational provisions that are made.

In the last three decades, educationists have over-flogged the new educational structure (6-3-3-4) as if it was the only important aspect of the new National Policy on Education. Very limited attention has been given by scholars to the ideas which formed the basis of the policy formulation.

This paper has four basic functions to perform.

- > To analyze the historical evolution of the 2004 education policy document in Nigeria.
- > To highlight the sections of the document dealing with equality in education.
- > To discuss the strategies for implementing equality in education in the Nigerian school system.
- > To identify problems involved and offer solutions.

Historical Evolution of 2004 Education Policy Document

The foundation of western education in Nigeria was laid by Christian missionaries who were eager to use literacy training to introduce Christianity and win converts to their religion. The missionaries also used western education to train Nigerians as catechists, messengers, and other positions needed to assist them in realizing the social and economic development and transformations desired by the European missionaries and their agents (Omolewa, 2006).

Stressing on what should be focus of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in the provision of education in Nigeria, Henry Venn, the CMS General Secretary in London in his letter to Henry Townsend in 1852 said:

You must seek to convert the heart Before you can instruct the mind.

In same vein, Frederick Lugard the Governor General of Nigeria 1914-1919 declared in his political memorandum the focus of missionary education in Nigeria when he wrote: To the missionary school education is mainly, if not wholly, an evangelistic agency... The first duty of the missionary is to give his converts a new outlook upon life, to create for them new social conditions. The first battle is with superstition and the old social order.

With the colonial government intervention in missionary education, the major objectives of education remained the training of Nigerians as clerks, interpreters and teachers. Sir Hugh Clifford who replaced Lugard as the governor in 1919 admitted this when he declared:

The chief function of government primary and secondary schools among primitive communities is to train the more promising boys from village schools as teachers, and clerks, for the local native courts and as interpreters.

All these point to the fact that the British colonial administration in Nigeria failed to provide functional and adequate educational philosophy. No wonder scholars openly criticized the colonial educational policy in Nigeria as being too academic, theoretical, inadequate and unsuitable for providing an overall development for the Nigerian child. The increasing need for educational relevance after political independence in 1960 gave rise to the re-evaluation of the old system and to invariably put in place a new national policy on education. The first official national conference that evolved the new education policy was held in Lagos from 8th to 12th September 1969 under the sponsorship of the Nigerian Educational Research Council (NERC).

This Conference was significant in that it was purely initiated and planned by Nigerians. In addition, the participants at the conference were a cross-section of Nigerian educators and consumers of educational products. These included Vice-Chancellors, Professors, Principals of teacher-training colleges and secondary schools, representatives of business, commerce and industry, farmers, civil servants, professionals, technicians, traders and parents. The conference also attracted a number of international organizations who participated as observers. Some international bodies also financially aided the conference. These included the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Canadian International Development Overseas (C.R.E.D.O). Other international bodies represented at the conference were: the Ford Foundation, the British Council and the United States Agency for International Development (U.S.A.I.D).

The 1969 Conference, among other things, evolved a national philosophy of education for Nigerians. In addition, it reviewed the educational objectives for the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. It also stipulated the role of science and technology in national development and made recommendations on the control of public education.

Most significantly, the 1969 Curriculum Conference came out with the bold recommendation of a six-year primary school course, followed by six years of secondary school, divided into a three-year junior secondary and a three-year senior secondary course, and lastly a four-year university education i.e. a 6-3-3-4 structure. Also important is the idea of multilateral or comprehensive schools it recommended. The conference submitted that comprehensiveness of schools in Nigeria should not be in numbers of students only but also in variety of course offerings- academic (arts and science), technical, professional and commercial.

In December 1972, the National Council on Education (NCE), a council of commissioners of education deliberated on the national policy on education. It was their submission at the end of the meeting that a seminar be held to make proposals for a national policy on education.

The first arrangement made to hold the seminar at the University of Ife between 26th and 28th February, 1973 was foiled by the students violent demonstration against some aspects of the National Youth Service Corps Scheme The seminar was later held at the Institute of International Affairs, Victoria Island, Lagos between 4th and 8th June, 1973.

The seminar, was held under the chairmanship of Chief S.O. Adebayo, a former Permanent Representative of Nigeria at the United Nations and at the period the chairman of the National Universities Commission. The seminar was well attended by Nigerian men and women who were invited for their proven interest and competence within the growing educational enterprise. These Nigerian participants which again cut across various interests included representatives of the Federal and State Ministries of Education; the Nigerian Union of Teachers; Conference of Secondary Schools and Teacher Training Principals; Primary Schools Administrators; the Nigeria Educational Research Council; Nigerian Employees Consultative Association; Nigerian Council for Science and Technology; the Army Educational Department; Citizenship and Leadership Training Centre; the Christian Council of Nigeria; the Catholic Church; National Universities Commission; Islamic Leaders; Specialists on Adult and Experts of Special Education; Ministries of Labour and Agriculture; Nigerian Association of University Women and representative of the National Union of Nigerian Students. The seminar was also attended by a number of experts who were released by UNESCO and the Common Wealth Secretariat in London as observers.

The published report of the seminar was handed to the Federal Ministry of Education with a covering letter dated June 2, 1973, who thereafter referred the seminar's report to the State Governments, the Nigerian Educational Research Council and the Joint Consultative Committee for comments. The report and the comments made were later considered by the National Council on Education for ratification. The end result was the Government White Paper titled "Federal Republic of Nigeria, National Policy on Education" which was published in March 1977.

In (the same year, the Federal Government set up a seven-man panel under the chairmanship of Professor Sanya Onabamiro as the implementation committee for the National Policy on Education. In 1978, the implementation committee submitted its report and in 1979, the federal government issued a White Paper on it entitled "Government views on the Implementation Committee's Blueprint" on "The Federal Republic of Nigeria National Policy on Education." The policy document and the implementation blueprint have guided Nigeria's educational development since 1977.

The policy has however undergone three revisions, one in 1981, another in 1998 and lastly in 2004. The revisions have been largely to take account of new developments in society as well as in the education system. The content of the 2004 policy is quite comprehensive, covering thirteen different sections of education. These are:

- > Philosophy and Goals of Education in Nigeria
- > Early Childhood/Pre-Primary Education
- > Basic Education
- > Primary Education
- > Secondary Education
- > Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education
- > Science, Technical and Vocational Education
- > Tertiary Education
- > Open and Distance Education
- > Special Education
- > Educational Services
- > Planning, Administration and Supervision of Education
- > Financing of Education.

Sections of the Document Dealing with Equal Education Opportunity

The philosophical assumption underlying the 2004 education policy is that every Nigerian child will have a full access to qualitative education with the intellectual or technical ability of individuals as the limiting factor. The implication of this is that every Nigerian child would be given the opportunity to receive the best education that would make him/her self-supporting or self-reliant, to the limit of his/her ability irrespective of the economic, political and religious status of the parents.

The document thus began with the expression of federal government' of Nigeria's recognition of education as a "huge governmental venture" and as "an instrument par excellence for effecting national development". It thereafter itemized five main philosophical goals which Nigeria education should promote. These are the building of:

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, and
5. a land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens.

To be able to build a democratic and egalitarian society, it is important that the issue of equal educational opportunity for all citizens should occupy the central place. Thus the writers of the policy document in Section 1 paragraph 4 (c) assert that:

every Nigerian child shall have a right to equal educational opportunities, irrespective of any real or imagined disabilities each according to his or her ability.

To emphasize the issue of equality in education, section 1 paragraph 5 (c) of the document asserts that Nigeria's philosophy of education is based on:

"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."

To achieve this objective, the document indicates in section 3 paragraph 15 that basic education shall be free and compulsory. Basic education is made up of 9 years schooling i.e. six years of primary and three years of junior secondary. Basic education also includes programmes at primary and junior secondary levels for the adults and out-of-school youths. The document further stipulates government's intentions to provide adequate facilities including library services, health programmes, counseling services, audio-visual facilities, all aimed at promoting sound and effective teaching at the basic education level. Furthermore, it proposes that incidence of drop-outs would be discouraged at this level.

Other guidelines to promote equal chances to education in the document include Section 4 paragraph 19J (I&II) which states that:

with a view to correcting the imbalance between different parts of the country, with reference to the availability of educational facilities and the number of pupils receiving formal education and girls education:-

- (i) State governments shall ensure the integration of formal basic education curriculum into Koranic and islamiya schools;
- (ii) Special efforts shall be made by all appropriate agencies to encourage parents to send their daughters to school.

Another important strategy to promote equality in education by the document is the provisions made for streaming students who complete junior secondary school into the senior secondary school, the technical college, out of school vocational training centre and apprenticeship scheme. Students at this level would be streamed into the various courses according to their interest aptitude and ability. Apart from the above, the provision made in the document for guidance and counseling, continuous assessment practice, the chance to develop psychomotor domains as well as the comprehensiveness of the curriculum at the various levels of education are all in the right direction for promoting the spirit of equal educational opportunity.

To wipe out illiteracy completely in Nigeria, Section 6 paragraph 32 asserts that mass literacy, adult and non-formal education shall:

provide functional literacy and continuing education for adults and youths who have never had the advantage of formal education or who did not complete their primary education. These include the nomads, migrant families, the disadvantaged and gender.

Furthermore, to promote equal access to higher education in Nigeria, section 8 paragraph 67 states that:

voluntary agencies, individuals and groups shall be allowed to establish universities, provided they comply with minimum standards laid down by the Federal Government.

This could possibly explain the reasons for privatization and proliferation of university education in Nigeria.

To give equal access to technical education and possibly encourage women participation Section 7 paragraph 51 of the document proposes the intention by government to encourage women to embrace technical education in Nigeria.

Governmental Strategies for Implementing Equal Educational Opportunity in Nigeria The Compulsory Basic Education act

The Federal Government of Nigeria officially launched the 9-year Universal Basic Education on September 30, 1999 while the implementation guideline was published in the year 2000. The UBE programme from its inception is intended to be universal, free and compulsory. These terms imply that appropriate types of opportunities will be provided for the basic education of every Nigerian child of school going age, that parents have an obligation to ensure that children in their care avail themselves of such opportunities, and that sanctions will be imposed on persons, societies, or institutions that prevent children, adolescents and youths from benefiting from UBE. It is also implied that Nigerian children in all manners and conditions of physical, spatial and psychological existence will benefit from the programme. To give a legal backing to the programme, a UBE bill was proposed by the Executive arm of Government and submitted to the National Assembly for passage in the year 2000.

The Act which was signed by the President, Federal Republic of Nigeria on Friday May 28, 2004 provides among others as follows:

S.2 (1) Every government in Nigeria shall provide free, compulsory and universal basic education for every child of primary and junior secondary school age. (2) Every parent shall ensure that his child or ward attends and completes his (a) primary school education, (b) junior secondary school education, by endeavouring to send the child to primary and junior secondary schools.

The Act imposes a fine not exceeding N10,000 or imprisonment for a term of 3 months or both for anybody who received or obtains any fee contrary to the provision of the subsection above. Also a parent or guardian who fails to send his child or ward to school commits an offence and is liable:

- (a) on first conviction, to be reprimanded.
- (b) On second conviction, to a fine of N2,000.00 or imprisonment for a term of 1 month or to both; and
- (c) On subsequent conviction, to a fine of N5,000.00 or imprisonment for a term of 2 months or to both.

The compulsory UBE Act in sections 7, 8, 9 and 10 provides for the establishment, membership and functions of the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) as well as for the funding of the programme. The Act further provides for the establishment of States Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB) and the organ for implementing the programme at local government education authority level. No doubt, the enactment of the UBE Act is a major landmark in the implementation of the programme and in the governmental efforts at giving mass education to Nigerians thereby addressing the issue of equal education opportunity.

Provisions Made for Full Access of Children with Special Needs to Education

The NPE (2004) defines special education as a formal special educational training given to people (children and adult) with special needs. The document recognizes three categories of people with special needs, namely: the disabled, the disadvantaged, the gifted and talented. In order to provide mass education for all children regardless of their physical, sensory, mental, psychological or emotional disabilities through special education, the Federal Government charged the Federal Ministry of Education with the responsibility for co-ordinating special education programme in collaboration with relevant ministries and non-governmental organizations.

Although there is no current data on the number of disabled persons now in homes and centres, or the number enrolled in various forms of institutions across the country, records show that each state government, as a matter of policy, runs a special school for the disabled. The federal government had also established a school for the gifted, the Federal Government academy, Suleja in 1990. Government effort at the tertiary level is seen in the establishment of departments of special

education at the Universities of Ibadan, Jos, Calabar, Bayero as well as the Federal College of Education (Special) Oyo among others, for the training of teachers for special education.

Nomadic education is on the other hand an arm of primary education provided for the pastoral nomads and migrant fishing communities in a formal setting in accordance with their migratory lifestyle. The pastoral nomads with estimated population of 6.5 million and migrant fishing communities numbering about 2.8 million constitute the most educationally disadvantaged groups in Nigeria with literacy levels of 0.2% for pastoralists and 2.0% for fishing communities in 1989.

To extend equal educational opportunity to the children of the nomads, the Federal Government of Nigeria charged the National Commission for Nomadic Education (NCNE) with the responsibility of providing relevant and functional education for them via NCNE Act. Cap 243, Laws of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1990.

According to the Education Sector Status report of May 2003 published by the Federal Ministry of Education, Abuja, the standard of instruction in nomadic schools in Nigeria is moderately high and encouraging even though some of the schools lacked adequate instructional materials and furniture. Between 1992 and 2002, 60, 212 nomadic children successfully completed primary education and 21,032 of this figure gained admissions to various secondary schools. (NCNE, 2002).

Mass Literacy Through Adult and Non-formal Education

In order to promote mass literacy, through adult and non-formal education, the Federal Government of Nigeria established a National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education (NMEC) by Decree 17 of 1990, with very clear mandates in the area of monitoring, coordinating and research on adult education. State agencies for mass education were also established in the 36 states and Abuja to implement adult education programme. The programmes of adult and non- formal education included basic literacy, post literacy, women education, functional literacy, nomadic education, continuing education, Arabic integrated education, literacy for the blind, workers education, vocational educational, literacy for the disabled, and prison education. These programmes are being offered in the various States under the supervision of the various States Agencies for Mass Education.

The heightened mobilization efforts of all concerned agencies with the leadership of NMEC and its state agencies have resulted in a massive awareness and demand for adult education programmes in Nigeria. According to the NMEC Statistical Digest (2001) the enrolment figures for participants between 1997 and 2000 show a progressive increase from a total of 1,155,532 participants in 1997 to 1,406,954 in 2000.

Table 1: Total Enrolment in Literacy Classes 1997-2000

Year	Male	Female	Total
1997	598,166	557,366	1,555,532
1998	666,131	598,130	1,264,289
1999	712,326	605,370	1,317,696
2000	701,798	705,156	1,406,954

Source: NMEC Statistical Digest, 2001

Access to Higher Education

In order to enforce quota admission as a check to educational imbalance and to rationalize the admission process to higher institutions in Nigeria, the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) was created by the Federal Government of Nigeria in the year 1977.

To promote access to university education, the Federal Government lifted the ban on the establishment of private university by the education (National Minimum Standards and Establishment of Institutions) (Amendment) Act 9 of 1993. That no doubt led to the current renewed spate of establishment of private universities in the country. In addition, the Federal government scholarship scheme which was banned during the military era was resuscitated in the year 2000.

Furthermore, to promote equal access to higher education, the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) was resuscitated in 2001 to provide expanded access to university education through a distance learning mode that is flexible, cost-effective, affordable and open to those who qualify but, who for reasons of their living conditions, cannot attend the traditional universities.

Challenges, Suggestions and Recommendations

In the Nigerian context, equal educational opportunity can mean children it means eliminating all possible barriers that could hinder mass functional literacy education within the shortest possible time.

Equality in education in Nigeria in this paper is therefore be viewed in terms of equal access to formal and non-formal education and the provision of educational facilities evenly in all our institutions of learning. Despite significant progress, inequality in education still exists. As over 10 million Nigerian children are still out of the basic school system.

For equal access to schooling therefore, the compulsory basic education act must be fully implemented in Nigeria. Teacher caught of extorting money from children should be duly prosecuted. Parents and guardians who refuse to allow their children to attend school must also be arrested and prosecuted. Government should provide free meals, textbooks and uniforms to pupils in the basic schools.

In addition, the continuous assessment practice and the guidance and counselling scheme already entrenched in the policy document should also be fully implemented in order to make streaming of students to various levels of the system after junior secondary school meaningful.

Furthermore, the existing qualitative gap between the Federal government colleges and the states funded secondary schools should be closed. Out of 3,855 secondary schools in the country, only 43 are Federal Government Colleges. These few institutions enjoy a striking feature of wealth in terms of good staffing, excellent buildings, well- equipped laboratories together with adequate teaching equipment whereas most of the public schools in the various states have these essential facilities.

To be able to achieve equality in our education in Nigeria, it is suggested that all public primary and secondary schools should be well equipped with facilities similar to what obtains in the Federal Government institutions. Teachers should also be exposed to in - service training as well as good welfare packages.

Conclusion

This paper has focused attention on the concept of equal educational opportunity and the strategy for attaining the principle as contained in the new educational policy document. It is the submission of this paper that inequality exists in the Nigerian educational system and that the 2004 educational policy stipulates good intention for improving if not completely eradicating inequality in-Nigerian education.

In order to quicken the tempo of implementation of the principle, a number of suggestions have been advanced. These include implementing universal free primary education compulsory act and ensuring the same treatment to all secondary institutions regardless of their being run by the Federal Government or the State Governments.

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