

EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY AND EDUCATIONAL EQUALIZATION: A MYTH OR REALITY IN NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

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Abstract

The notion of equality in social system has been brought to bear on education, thus many societies today talk of equal educational opportunity and educational equalization. Many countries are making provision for equal educational opportunities. Equal educational opportunity means that all persons are born equal and should be treated equally in having access to education irrespective of sex, race, religion, social class or disability, while equalization of education is an attempt to make the educational attainment levels of the various groups in a society to be equal. The government of Nigeria at various levels has taken several measures to make the principles of equal educational opportunity a reality; however several obstacles still stand against it lending to make it a myth. Some of these measures and the obstacles were discussed in the paper and some measures were recommended to make educational opportunity a reality in Nigeria.

The relevance of education to national development is generally an accepted fact both in government circle and among the stakeholders in Nigeria. It is in view of this that education has been recognized as a means through which political, economic and social change can be fostered.

The Federal Government of Nigeria state in the National Policy on Education (2004:p.6) that:

- (a) *Education is an instrument for national development, to this end the formulation of ideas, their integration for national development and the interaction of persons and ideas are all aspects of education.*
- (b) *Education fosters the worth and development of the individual, for each individual's sake and for the general development of the society.*

The idea of equal educational opportunities and educational equalization is linked with the equality notions in the social system. The social system which intends to provide equal opportunities for the advancement of all has to make provisions for equal educational opportunities also. However, equal educational opportunities to all as well as educational equalization among various sections and segments of the society has never been fully achieved for one reason or the other particularly in Nigeria. Baikie (2002) mentioned that “the desire to provide equal opportunities to all in quest of education has been expressed in many ways

but the intention has not been accompanied by a determination to concretely implement and actualize the desire”.

The Federal Government of Nigeria categorically stated in the National Policy on Education (2004:p.7) that “every Nigerian child shall have a right to equal educational opportunity irrespective of any real or imagined disabilities, each according to his or her ability”. In reality, is the Nigerian education system moving towards the achievement of this or it is just a myth?

The paper examines the idea of equal educational opportunities, educational equalization, efforts made towards educational opportunity in Nigeria, obstacles to the philosophical idea in practice and possible ways of achieving equal educational opportunity in Nigerian educational system.

Equal Educational Opportunity

Equal educational opportunity and educational equalization is all about educational distribution and how education ought to be made available to individuals in any society. According to Obayan, (2009), “equity implies equal treatment and equal gains”.

Salawu (1995), as cited by Ofoha (2010) also argued that the idea of equality means that all persons are born equal and are treated equally irrespective of their social status. He however added that nature itself initiates inequality and therefore, not every inequality is unjust. Ofoha went further to state that educational inequality arising from differences in choice, ability and virtues are just, while educational inequality promoted by sex, social class, race, state of origin, disability and religion are unjust.

Equality is used in fundamental social arrangement or interactions. One of its functions in education is to socialize the young ones in appropriate ways without hindrance or barrier; hence education should be free. The concept is also applied to the function of providing all citizens opportunity to realize individual potentials. This implies that no one should be excluded from the opportunities of education, and of fund in public education. Ofoha (2010) reaffirmed that “the idea of equality with reference to education means equal rights to all irrespective of any circumstances by way of birth, race, sex, tribe or disability.

In essence, the principle of equality in education has the following characteristics.

1. Education should be free, universal and compulsory to some extent.
2. No one should be excluded for one reason or the other from opportunities of education and of fund in public education
3. Equal social benefits – benefits of access to higher education, finance, influence, position, amenities and other social needs.
4. Equal educational benefits – learning outcomes, knowledge, and skills - knowledge and skill achievable in private schools should also be available in public schools.

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5. Equal educational treatment – procedure and practices should be equal in all educational institutions, be it private or public and at all levels.
6. Equal distribution of resources and facilities – particularly teaching and learning facilities – chairs, desks, classrooms, machines tools, workshop, laboratories, equipment libraries, books, etc.
7. Equal opportunity to a large number of people for earnings through education – job opportunity for a large number of educated people.

The idea of equal educational opportunity is that the distribution of education to individuals should be entirely based on ability. It requires the removal of all artificial barriers to education whether parental income, race, geographical location, religious belief or social status. Thus, in placement procedure, or admission to schools should not be based on race, religion, ethnic, social or economic background but only on aptitude and ability.

Educational Equalization

The principle of equalization recognizes that all men are alike in possessing reasoning aptitude, and in social and economic status but not at the same degree. It recognizes that ‘sameness’ is not applicable to human affairs but different groups in different locations, regions or states.

Educational equalization is an attempt to make the educational attainment levels of the various groups that exist in a society or country to be equal. According to Enoh, (1992), it is “an attempt to even the number of educated individuals among” various groups – between male and female, tribes, religious affiliations, between states or between various regions and geopolitical zones of the country. However, in every society or country there are divisions based on tribe, sex, religion, social stratum, economic status, geographical location and even ability and aptitude. Thus inequalities exist between various groups because looking at different ‘sub-divisions closely, it would be evident that they will hardly have an equal number of educated individuals, (Enoh,1992).

It means that any differences in educational attainment ought to be compensated in the group having lower number of educated individuals. For example, if the aim of the government is to equalize education between the North and the South, which we all know that the southerners have attained educational height, conditions may be made more favourable for the Northerners to have more educational placements and advancement faster than the southerners, so that northerners would catch up on equal basis with the southerners by use of measures – such as quota system, imposition of barrier, special grant to educationally disadvantaged states, imposition of fees on educationally advanced states, etc.

In practice, equality of educational opportunity makes attempts for every individual to rise up the educational ladder on the basis of his or her ability and aptitude. Attempts are also made to remove all obstacles for such individual’s educational progress. On the other hand, in educational equalization attempts are

made to deliberately introduce or impose some obstacles to serve as barriers or checks for the educationally advanced group in order to allow the latter group to move up the ladder or rather introduce and apply measures to encourage the latter group to move up at a faster rate and catch up with the educationally advanced group. Practically, educational equalization works against equality of educational opportunity one way or the other. However to equalize education in Nigeria positive measures should be adopted. This should include complete free universal basic education with all forms of obstacles removed, bursary and scholarship award by various governments in the country, provision of remedial programmes in universities located in states deemed to be educationally backward, and implementation of other measures recommended in this article.

Attempts at Achieving Equal Educational Opportunity

To achieve the above, the Federal Republic of Nigeria stated in the National Policy on Education (2004) that: Nigeria's philosophy of education therefore is based on:-

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

The 1999 constitution also lays credence to the above statement when it states in paragraph 18 that:

- (1) Government shall direct its policy towards ensuring that there are equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels.
- (2) Government shall promote science and technology
- (3) Government shall strive to eradicate illiteracy; and to this end government shall as and when practicable provide –
 - (a) free, compulsory and universal primal education;
 - (b) free secondary education;
 - (c) free university education; and
 - (d) free adult literacy programme.

To make the principles of equal educational opportunity a reality in Nigeria the following measures have been taken among others by the government at various levels:-

The introduction of Universal Primary Education in 1976 and the subsequent expansion of the programme as Universal Basic Education to reach Junior Secondary School (JSS) class three in 1999 were great steps towards expanding educational opportunities to all that could make use of them. The children of both the rich and the poor were given the opportunity to advance educationally, because a large number of new schools were established and old ones expanded. There was also the hope that with improved technical, vocational

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and scientific academic curricula, each child could receive formal education compounding to his or her age, aptitude and ability

To eliminate problem of finance, the state and the federal governments, through their various agencies such as Ministries of Education, Education Trust Fund (ETF), Petroleum Technology Development Fund (PTDF), States and Federal Scholarship Boards and local governments, award bursary and scholarships to deserving students in various institutions. When offered to children of poor parentage, it goes a long way to eliminate problem of finance which has been found to limit their access to higher education. Some state governments even pay Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (SSCE) fees for students in all secondary schools in their states, irrespective of their home background.

Establishment of schools of Basic studies or remedial programmes in some higher institutions located in northern states that are educationally backward is another way to equalize educational opportunity by enabling individuals from those educationally backward states to improve and secure admission to tertiary institutions.

In the same vein, there has been an increase in the number of universities in Nigeria by federal, state and private organizations. According to Enoh (1992.p.120) this “is an attempt at geographical equalization of education as it provides every individual an opportunity with a university in his own state of origin”. This make no one to be considered disadvantaged in his attempt to gain university admission.

The establishment of National Open University and Opening Distance Learning programmes (ODL) in Nigeria can be argued to be of great significance as they are steps towards ‘life long education’ as contained in the National Policy on Education (2004:p.9). The Nigeria Open University, according to Ofoha, (2010) has been up to its mandate.

Some northern states have taken some steps towards reducing inequalities in education due to sex by declaring free education for female students in some courses. If this move is fully implemented, it will improve female educational chances, thus reducing the gap between males and females in some northern states.

The establishment of National Commission for Normadic Education by the Federal Government to take care of the education of the children of nomads and migrant fishermen is another milestone in achieving equal educational opportunity in this country if the intended objectives could be achieved

Obstacles to Equal Educational Opportunity in Nigeria

Socio-economic Inequalities:- This is a common problem in every society. In Nigeria too, there exist the people of upper, middle and lower classes. The inequality in income and status among the individuals in the society make the whole idea of equal educational opportunity almost impracticable. “The socio-

economic differences do not only determine an individual's level of mental development but also determine access to any level of education" (Enoh, 1992). In addition, demand for and payment of school fees in whatever form is another obstacle to the realization of equal educational opportunity in Nigeria. In this, it is only the children of the rich ones that are able to meet the demand of schools fees which eventually gives them advantage over their counterparts who could not pay such fees.

Differences Between Urban and Rural Areas:- There is inequality in the distribution of certain essential and basic infrastructure by the government in this country. In the urban areas, there are usually abundant social amenities, and standard and well equipped schools compared with scanty social amenities and poorly equipped schools in the rural areas. Children studying in schools in the rural areas are at disadvantage and yet, they have to compete with the children in urban areas in several public examinations and qualifying tests before being admitted into higher institutions.

Existence of Special Schools: - The presence of special schools in the country constitutes additional obstacle to equal educational opportunity in the country. These special schools are of different categories but certain things are common to them – they demand for very high fees, have adequate and highly qualified staff, standard equipment and fascinating school environment. The high cost nature of the schools makes it impossible for the children of lower class to gain admission into the schools because they are unaffordable to them. When children from these special schools sit for public examination, they have greater chances of doing better than the children from public schools. These two facts are also obstacles to the realization of equal educational opportunity. Amaele, (2003, June) cited Ajayi, (1993:p.28) who described private schools in Lagos built for the rich, thus:

The schools premisesare enough to lure a willing soul to reading. With big trees to provide breeze and shades from the tropical sun of Lagos, airy classrooms and the beautiful surroundings, the schools contrasts sharply with the dilapidated, dirty and repulsive buildings of the public schools.

Level of Intelligence:- Intelligence is both the product of heredity and environment. In this case, two individuals with identical innate intelligence will not necessarily have the same level of general intelligence development if their environment is different. The improved environment of one gives him an advantage to succeed in school over his counterpart who grew up in a poor environment. To these two, there can hardly be equality of educational opportunity.

Increase in family size, according to Nisbet, (1961) affects the intelligence of an individual, meaning that for an individual from a large family,

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the family size may affect the development of his or her innate abilities, which will in turn lead to a reduced chance of progress in school compared to another child from a smaller sized family. The claim is that when family size is small, children interact more with adults and this helps them to acquire grown up language and ideas than they would if they had many siblings.

Birth Order:-Inequality of educational opportunity is even made clear, when one considers birth-order or position in the family and access to school. For instance Bayer, (1967) observed that families who send their children born earlier to receive higher education spend so much on them that they become unable to afford to send their children born later, especially if they have many children and are of low income status. Even children of the same parents can end up not having equal educational opportunity.

At the family level, it is impossible to achieve equal educational opportunity due to differences between families generally and it is impossible to equalize families. Unless this is done, there is no way in which individuals will not continuously be favoured in selection, thus making the whole issue of equal educational opportunity a myth. The truth is that good and standard schools are for the rich; their children there are more or less destined to succeed from the beginning, unlike their counterpart from poor parents. Even when a child from poor parents manages to get admitted into a federal government school he or she may not be able to cope with the pace or even afford to start or to finish in the school without sound financial support.

Conclusion

Nigeria needs to improve on her equality of educational opportunity, therefore there is need to recognize the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic formation of the people of this country. The country should be able to offer her citizens educational programmes to cater for their different interests. To make the equal educational opportunity a reality the government should design the curricula, and programmes as well as teaching methods and instructional materials to facilitate learning and increase students' chances of achieving success.

Husen, (1971) as cited by Ejie, (2004) stated that "the concept of equal educational opportunity includes equal opportunities to succeed in and through education needs". This should be given serious attention. Education should be made to reflect the culture of various communities, cater for diverse educational needs of the people with diversified educational programmes. It is when this is fully achieved that we shall have solution to some of our societal ills and vices and be able to make some technological breakthrough.

Recommendations

Education helps in establishing equality and ensuring social justice but the system of education itself can add to the existing inequalities or at least,

perpetuate the same if it is not well managed. The following recommendations are made in order to make equality of educational opportunity a reality in the country and lead us to qualitative education:

1. All forms of school fees and levies should be abolished in all Universal Basic Education schools in order to allow all Nigerian children irrespective of tribe and family background to have free education from primary to junior secondary school classes.
2. A scheme to provide the students in both primary and junior secondary schools with uniform, textbooks and exercise books should be put in place in all the states of the federation. This will remove any form of hindrance to basic education for all students. Though this has been in practice in some states in the country, the scheme should be continuously sustained and other states should be made to put such scheme in place.
3. All primary and junior secondary schools should be adequately equipped with teaching and learning facilities such as classrooms, benches, desks, chairs, tables libraries teachers' books, laboratories as well as workshops and workshop equipment.
4. Adequate number of qualified teachers should be employed for all classes and subjects at all levels of the school system and vocational centres so as to ensure efficiency in the school system.
5. The present curriculum should be reviewed and made to be broad based in all the schools to include vocational and technical education so as to allow children with diverse aptitudes, abilities and interest to benefit. The curriculum should be made uniform for both public and private schools in the country.
6. The federal as well as the state governments in the country should increase their financial allocation to education so that the positive effect of such improved funding can trickle down to all the levels of the system. The governments at various levels should consider the implementation of the 26% allocation of their budget to education as recommended by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), (Dare, 2009).
7. To maintain uniform standard and efficiency in teaching and learning in schools, proper and effective supervisory machinery should be put in place for the supervision of both the private and public schools. The inspectorate divisions of the state and federal ministries of education should be adequately equipped to face the challenges of maintaining standard in all schools.
8. Remedial measures as normadic education, migrant fishermen children's education, adult and non formal education and vocational centres, should be encouraged and implemented with utmost support of the government.
9. Guidance and counseling services should be fully implemented and provided for at all levels of the education system. Teachers of all

- categories should be motivated to stay on the job and perform their duties efficiently so as to promote effective teaching and learning in the schools.
10. To ensure equal educational opportunity in the country all forms of inequalities and discrimination based on sex, religion, tribe, language and all certain cultural practices should be abolished.
 11. Educational institution offering Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes such as National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and National Teachers' Institute (N.T.I) should be encouraged to expand the scope of their programmes to meet the desire of various categories of people who could no longer go to conventional schools for formal learning. The Open and Distant Learning (ODL) programme should be subsidized by the government to allow poor and low income learners to have access to quality education offered by those ODL institutions.
 12. All tertiary institutions in the country should be made to base their admission policy entirely on merit. Efforts should also be made to popularize the laws promoting equal opportunities in access to education so that all parents and children would know that they have right to educational opportunities.

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