



## **An Appraisal of Equal Educational Opportunities and its Implications for Peace and Development in Nigeria**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The search for an appropriate formula for the distribution of education owes much to its significance, namely; its potency to resolve societal problems. In the words of Akinpelu (1981) “Over the ages, nations have looked to education to solve some major problems raised in other areas of the national life”. It is therefore only when societal problems are resolved by educational means that peace shall prevail. Development of any nature and magnitude can only thrive in an atmosphere of peace. In the absence of peace therefore, crisis will set in and consequently underdevelopment will feature prominently. The quest for peace in Nigeria has been a vexed issue because crises of varying dimensions have continued to rear their ugly heads in virtually all ramifications of our national life. Otakpor (1983) named some as corruption, bribery, indiscipline, immorality, drug addiction and armed robbery. He concluded by stating thus: “name any establishment and it has a history of woes, failures and thus human suffering”. A great human suffering currently staring Nigeria on the face is that of insecurity of lives and properties. The question is, what is wrong with the mode of educational distribution in Nigeria as to warrant these woes? In what follows, an exposition of the concept of equal educational opportunities will ensue.

### **Equal Educational Opportunities**

The consideration of equality in the distribution of education stems from the consideration that at least all men are equal and as such, they ought to be treated equally. The notion of equality connotes sameness where one thing is

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a perfect or exact representation of another. Akinpelu (1981) calls this mathematical equality and further explain that, “for example,  $2 + 2 = 4$ . The sign of equality in the expression indicates that the figure on the right is perfectly the same as those in the left of the equation”.

Although the position of the equalitarians look attractive enough but on second thought, there is more to it than meets the eyes. For instance, a question could be raised in respect in which all men are equal. This is because while it may be justifiable to treat some men equally in some respects, it cannot be the case in other respects. Adewole (1988) confirms this when he wrote that:

if we grant that we can secure equality in certain respects between members of certain classes for certain purposes, and under certain conditions, we need to note that we can never secure it in all respects between all men, for all purposes and under all conditions.

Men are truly different in several respects. While some are tall, others are either moderate or short. While some are white, others are either black or yellow. While some are hot-tempered, others are cool-tempered. To crown it all, the psychologists have confirmed that no two individuals can be equal, not even the identical twins. To treat men absolutely equal in the provision of education therefore becomes unfair and unacceptable.

Consequent upon the problems of absolute equality, a more plausible proposal that presents itself is Plato's equal educational opportunities. In it, Plato's philosophy of education was linked to an ideal state which he conceived as socially just and harmonious. Justice to Plato consists in every member of the state contributing his quota to the welfare of the state in the sphere that he is naturally endowed and trained. Education was thus meant to “make each person perform most competently and most efficiently the functions of the division to which he belongs” (Akinpelu, 1981). The three strata of the society and the appropriate virtue for each are guardian-wisdom, auxiliary-courage and the common people-discipline.

In equalizing educational opportunities for each of the stratum of the society, Plato contends that education should be made:

state financed, controlled and organized; no private proprietorship. Also there was no place for sex-based discrimination since the allocation of duty was not based on sex criteria; hence education was equally for men and women. All children were to be reared together and educated together for nursery, kindergarten and primary education at the end of which they would be streamed according to their talents or natural abilities demonstrated and observed. (Akinpelu, 1981).

### **Practice of Equal Educational Opportunities in Nigeria**

Arising from the attractions of equal educational opportunities, most nations of the world including Nigeria, have adopted it in sharing educational places to their citizens. In this respect, the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004) legislates that “there is need for equality of educational opportunities to all Nigerian children, irrespective of any real or imagined disabilities each according to his or her ability”. The policy document further state that, the philosophy of Nigeria 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”. In order to provide equal educational opportunities for all Nigerian children, “Universal Basic Education in a variety of forms... shall be provided for all citizens”. Basic education by definition shall comprise six years primary education and three years junior secondary education and it shall be free and compulsory.

The principle of equal educational opportunities was viewed as being the fairest because it has purportedly taken care of the deficiencies of absolute equality. Be that as it may, on deeper reflection, the adopted principle also suffers a deficiency namely, the basing of education solely on intellect. To the meritocrats, accidental factors like family background, race, sex and religion should be disregarded in the process of distributing educational places in favour of only the candidate’s intellect. The question is, is intelligence not also an accidental factor? This question is raised against the back-drop of the consideration that no child chooses his intellectual ability because if it were a matter of choice, surely no-one could choose to be of low intelligence. Even if the child’s mental ability is a function of heredity, again, the child has no hands in the choice of whoever he is inheriting his intellect from.

Another observation that could be made in the submission of the policy document is its claim that “there is need for equal educational opportunities” (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). This sounds more of a suggestion or recommendation than a policy statement. As a law, it should be clearly stated in categorical terms.

### **Reflections on States’ Responsibilities in Providing Equal Educational Opportunities**

The responsibilities of the state in providing equal educational opportunities as specified by Plato include the funding, organization and control of education by the state, the phasing out of privately owned educational institutions, no sex discrimination in the provision of education and free and compulsory education. Plato contended that, for equal educational opportunities to be achieved, all schools should be owned by the state. Ironically, in Nigeria this is not feasible because of the heavy presence of

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private schools who are strongly supported by the National Policy on Education. On early childhood/pre-primary education, the policy document legislates that “Government shall encourage private efforts in the provision of pre-primary education”. Similarly, at the primary school level, the National Policy on Education has this to say: “Government welcomes the contribution of voluntary agencies, communities and private individuals in the establishment and management of primary schools alongside those provided by the State and Local Government” (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). The same is the case with secondary and tertiary education.

Premised on the above policy provisions, one wonders how equal educational opportunities can ever be achieved as claimed by the same policy document. This is because a major attribute of private schools is the payment of school fees which is normally exorbitant. This according to Oguntoye (1989) is most likely to “lead to too much commercialization of education which may not be good for a society at Nigeria’s stage of development”. The problem of fees paying schools lies in the consideration that at most times, it is only the wealthy that can afford such school fees. This confers an undue advantage on their children over those of indigent parents who cannot afford the school fees despite their interest and children’s mental ability to attend private schools. Arguing against fees paying private schools vis-a-vis the achievement of equal educational opportunities in Nigeria, Adewole (1989) clarifies that:

in most places, inequality is still the general rule and hence, egalitarians object to that institutional arrangement where a sector of schools financed and administered independently of the state exists. The argument is that such an arrangement is unfair to the poor ones who cannot afford the high fees charged in such schools.

Plato recommended a free and compulsory education. This is supported by the National Policy on Education but only at the basic education level. Accordingly, it is stated that “basic education shall be free, universal and compulsory” (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). From the above discussion on the existence of private schools in their numbers, it is evident that Nigerian education is not free and can hardly guarantee equal educational opportunities. Worse still, even the public schools which are purportedly free charge numerous levies that when added up, could equal or exceed the school fees. Again, despite the compulsory clause on basic education many Nigerian children still roam the streets without any sanction being imposed on them or their parents.

Another dimension of equal distribution of educational places as prescribed by Plato is the inconsideration of sex. The National Policy on Education also advocates an equal treatment of both sexes in the provision of educational opportunities. In practice however, there is a marked disparity

between male and female citizens. As it is, the males have an edge over the females. This is confirmed by Damar's (1998) submission as she complained that:

The problem of gender disparity in school enrolments and educational opportunities have always presented a challenge to womanhood. Many States in Nigeria particularly the Northern States... show low enrolment and high drop-out of females in schools from primary to tertiary levels.

Plato endorsed the state's funding, organizing and control of education in order to achieve equal educational opportunities. In negation to this principle, the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004) clarifies that "the financing of education is a joint responsibility of the Federal, State and Local Governments and the private sector. In this connection, Government welcomes and encourages the participation of local communities, individuals and other organizations". This has led Nigerian education to suffer gross under funding over the years. In 1999 for instance, only 11.2% of the budget was allocated to education. In 2002, it dropped down to 5.9% and in 2003 and 2009, education secured 1.83% budgetary allocation (Udeh and Edet, 2009).

Since then up to date, the budgetary allocation to education has never met the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recommendation of allocating 26% of the budget to education. This has resulted into chains of crises in the educational sector particularly Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) strikes.

#### **Implications of State's Failure on Peace and Development in Nigeria**

Plato's position is that where equal educational opportunities are provided, society will be just and harmonious but where the reverse becomes the case, it results in crises and consequently underdevelopment. The failure to achieve equal educational opportunities in Nigeria as buttressed above has given birth to a sizeable street roaming children and youth of schools age. It is for instance estimated that 15 million school age children are out of the school in Northern Nigeria alone. This is on the face of the legislation that basic education is compulsory country wide. Since these children are ignorant, illiterates and most at times idle, the idle mind is said to be the workshop of the devil. The bitter fruits of the workshop are reaped by the Nigerian society via the series of crises that we witness. Writing on the 1987 Kafanchan crisis, Rotgak (2004) explains that "the first participants of the mob attack were children between the ages of 6 and 12.... It was those children in their scores who were in front of the mob".

No Nigerian needs to be reminded that peace is not such a common commodity that could be easily accessed by many. This is evident in the

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various insecurity challenges that we read, hear and/or experience all over the country. Ehuasani (1996) captures this when he revealed that:

I retire to bed these days and sleep with an eye open. Reason: I am not sure if my domestic staff are would-be assassins!. When I am being driven to and from work, my eyes keep darting from left to right. Reason: The Driver of the car next to mine might be an assassin (or a kidnapper)... I can no longer check in at a Fiver Star Hotel. Reason: A bomb might have been planted somewhere!.. Finally, I decided to go to Church to pray about all these –I had to pray with an eye open. Reason: One can never be too sure these days.

Arising from security challenges as pointed out above, it is obvious that the fear of death has gained a firm grip of many Nigerians. This owes much to the fact that some Nigerians who are mostly educationally deficient have turned out to be perpetrators of multiple crises in the form of hired assassins, suicide bombers, armed robbers, political thugs and attackers on innocent souls. These have in turn caused untold hardships and misery to families who have lost dear ones or properties. Women are widowed and children orphaned prematurely. It however become an incontestable claim that we are a thoroughly terrorized nation ruled by fear and insecurity and daily haunted by sudden or violent death

Let us now turn to the impacts of the failure to achieve equal educational opportunities on development in Nigeria. The most prominent indicators of under-development include ignorance, poverty and disease. The prevalence of ignorance in the sphere of peaceful co-existence has already been examined above. This will be followed by a discussion on poverty and disease in relation to development in Nigeria. This will determine whether despite security challenges that Nigeria suffers, she is developed.

On poverty, the position has been that Nigeria is remarkably blessed with both human and natural resources. On human resources, it is on record that Nigeria is the most populous of all the nations in Africa. In addition, her population sizably consists of intelligent and energetic people. On natural resources, Nigeria possesses a vast and fertile land with a favourable weather to match. Forest resources are abundantly found in the South in addition to the rich deposit of high quality petroleum. There are appreciable deposits of tin, coal, lime stone and iron ore.

Paradoxically, despite the riches of Nigeria as shown above, Ahuasani (1996) confirms that : “majority of Nigerians are today living in abject poverty”. The evidence being that “thousands of Nigerians can be seen daily rummaging through garbage dumps in search of sour food, rotten fruits and used clothes”. This situation has caused them to live in starvation and misery. A situation like this breed a fertile ground for crises to thrive to the detriment of development. According to Ahuasani (1996).

When a multitude of people are bounded in squalor, when they struggle each day to eke a miserable existence under sub-human conditions, when their circumstances get worse each day and when there is no hope of reprieve in sight, then the seed of violence is sown.

Another economic factor closely tied to the above is the issue of unemployment. It has to be quickly added without mincing words that the rate of unemployment in Nigeria is alarming. Ehuasani (1996) said that “our streets are lined up with unemployed youth many not knowing where and when the next meal will come”. Then, like their poor counterparts, they live each day by scavenging and competing with rodents for a share of the content of the garbage heaps. This is a clear sign of underdevelopment.

Development as earlier on mentioned can also be measured in terms of the health status of the citizens of a country. The health condition of Nigerians can hardly be rated as satisfactory. This owes much to the general sorry state of the structures and facilities in our health institutions. These are in addition to the inadequate supply of drugs and personnel in this vital sector. In consequence, our health institutions have sadly remained consulting clinics. This harsh health situation has led to the exodus of Nigerian doctors to other countries in search of greener pasture. It is for instance, estimated that not less than 21 thousand Nigerian doctors are busy solving the health problems of other nations beyond the shores of their fatherland. These have led to the triumph of diseases that could otherwise have been checked through immunization. For instance, polio militis has been eradicated in all African countries except three countries among which is Nigeria. This is in addition to the menace of HIV/AIDS and other diseases. The well selected words of Adewole (2007) best rounds up this segment of the discussion; Because people are illiterate, they are ignorant; Because they are ignorant they are poor; Because they are poor, they are hungry and disease-ridden. Because they suffer from all these things, they produce very little and so become poorer and more underdeveloped and incapable of impacting on national development.

## **CONCLUSION**

From the foregone, it is made explicit that the concept of equal educational opportunities is in itself problematic since no individual can determine the level of his intellect. The implementation of the principle was also found to be unattainable because of the existence of private schools and poor funding of education. Resulting from these failures, many school age children are out of the school. It is mostly from this group that crises of varying dimensions are brewed. In an atmosphere of crises, development cannot thrive. For this reason, Nigeria is underdeveloped because she suffers from crises executed

by citizens who could not benefit from the equal educational opportunities clause enshrined in the National Policy on Education.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

On the basis of the above conclusion, the following recommendations are made in order to facilitate the achievement of equal educational opportunities in Nigeria:

1. Owing to the inconsistencies inherent in the National Policy on Education, the policy document should be reviewed. This will help in no small measure to expunge aspects of the policy that constitute bottle necks to the achievement of equal educational opportunities in Nigeria. For instance, the encouragement of the establishment of privately owned educational institutions.
2. Since private schools serve a divisive role in the society, the government should abolish them. This will make all Nigerian children to attend public schools. By so doing, influential parents in government and society will be made to pay attention to public schools since their children will have no alternative than to patronize such schools.
3. Having abolished all private schools, the government should also ban all Nigerians from travelling abroad to school. This will serve as a check on wealthy parents who may still wish to pursue private education for their children elsewhere.
4. In facilitating the achievement of equal educational opportunities in Nigeria, candidates writing any form of examination should not indicate their Sex, Religion, Local Government Area or State of Origin, Race and Ethnicity.
5. The National Policy on Education should be genuinely implemented by the government. This recommendation is borne out of the fact that there exists a wide chasm between the provisions of the policy document and what is on the ground. For instance, by the token of the National Policy on Education, basic education of nine years is free and compulsory but the levies charged are tantamount to school fees. Again, basic education cannot be compulsory when a lot of school age children freely roam the streets.
6. The scope of basic education should be redefined. Instead of restricting it to nine years of primary and junior secondary school only, it should start from pre-primary school to the University level. This is because the knowledge, attitudes and skills obtained at that level will fit the graduates more appropriately into the Nigerian society.



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