

Barriers to Equality of Access to Educational Opportunity in Nigeria: A Philosophical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Education as well as its objective are dynamic instruments needed to meet and satisfy the aspirations of the citizens they are meant to serve. Limited resources and a rapidly expanding child population pose problems of “who gets educated” in Nigeria. The question of educational imbalance has been a dominant issue which subsequent Nigerian governments have had to tackle since independence. No matter how much they try to spread educational opportunity equitably, a number of barriers have acted to counter governments good intentions. The study has identified some of these barriers as including: the problem of carrying capacity, quota system of admissions, unaffordable costs, armed conflicts/insurgency, selection methods, gender inequality amongst others. The study further proffered possible solutions before arriving at some conclusion.

Introduction

The common belief that expansion of schooling leads to greater equality of access to educational opportunity informs various government measures aimed at off-setting educational imbalance between classes, states and ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Recognising the important contribution of education to political, economic and social dynamics of society, the National Policy on Education (1981) states “not only is education the greatest force that can be used to bring about redress, it is also the greatest investment that the nation can make for the quick development of its economic, political, sociological and human resources”.

The above quoted policy statement on education forms the plank for the popular demand for education in Nigeria. The growing awareness on the part of citizens about the value and importance of education adds to the quest for provision of educational opportunity in the country. Arguing along this line, Beeby (1969) states that “the passionate desire of common men and women to give their own children a better chance in life gave the demand for education its explosive quality, and made of it a political force that no democratic government could long resist”.

But the growing scale of educational provision requires some form of centralized co-ordination and planning. Again, the rising cost of education is met from tax payers money which subjects its spending to public critical examination. Thus, it is clear that if education is to be made accessible to all citizens, governments at all levels, have a responsibility to ensure its equitable distribution. The crux of the matter is that no matter the various attempts at equalizing educational opportunity in any given society, inequalities still abound.

The Concept of Equality

The Declaration of Rights of Man (1789) states “men are born, and always continue, free and equal in respect of their rights”. The American Declaration of Independence (1776) also asserts “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...”. Despite these great pronouncements, what seems obvious is inequality of men as against their equality.

Reason adduced is that men are unequal in height, intellectual abilities, size, physical strength and even moral capacity. Two individuals born at the same time and day may not be said to be equal as one can be congenitally defective while the other is not. It is established that the social and physical environment of two individuals born on a particular day and time, enhance or reduce their equality or inequality at birth. This goes to show that the statement that all men are born equal is spurious.

The concept of equality can only be discussed in a mathematical or scientific sense, where $7 + 1 = 8$ simply means that the numbers on the left hand side of the equation are equal to the number on the right hand side. Using a weighing balance we can also adduce that the weights on the two scales of the balance are exactly equal when an equilibrium is reached.

We also discuss the equality of men under law, where all citizens of a country are treated alike under law. Even at that we notice that wealthy men and women in every society have better chances of hiring the best lawyers in order to get better justice.

Economic equality also attempts to expunge all differences in wealth, allotting to everyman and woman an equal share in worldly goods (Bryce, quoted in Appadorai 1975). But David Hume (quoted in Appadorai 1975) counters Bryce view by stating that “men’s different degrees of art, care, and industry will immediately

break that equality. Or if you check these virtues, you reduce society to the most extreme indulgence". According to David Hume, economic equality means "the provisions of adequate opportunities for all; the right to work, to adequate wages, to reasonable hours of labour and leisure and to self government in industry so that everyone may have a fair start in life". This agrees with what Laski (1952) says "that no man shall be so placed in society that he can overreach his neighbor to the extent which constitutes a denial of the latter's citizenship". According to him "equality is not identity of treatment. Fundamentally, it implies a certain leveling process".

Barriers To Educational Opportunity

Wikipedia online Dictionary defines barrier as a circumstance or obstacle that keeps people or things apart or prevents communication or progress. It further describes it as a physical structure which blocks or impedes something.

Access to education according to Okeke (2009) means free and unlimited, unhindered and unfettered opportunities at each level of education to obtain knowledge, skills, and abilities available at that level needed to optimally participate and contribute to development in the society. He goes on to state that this definition of access to education covers the threshold of access or enrolling, attending and completing and possibly transiting to the appropriate level of education. Thus, lack of access to education or "barrier to educational access" means any of the following: failing to enroll in an educational institution; lack of opportunities to attend school regularly, inability to complete the prescribed programme of study (leading to school dropouts), inability to attain a set goal, and inability to transit to the next level of education (Aluede, Idogho & Inonike, 2012).

In the context of this study, barriers to educational opportunity could mean the extent to which people have circumstances or obstacles that keep them away from unhindered opportunities to access equal educational opportunity.

It should be noted that many nations of the world have accepted the need to embrace education as a tool for access to the limited opportunities at any level of their social strata. Unfortunately this vision has been limited by many factors – which vary from one country to another. In Nigeria, these factors include: individual differences amongst pupils, selection methods, the quota system of admission, unaffordable costs, gender discrimination, armed conflicts, limited admission spaces and so on.

Having highlighted some of the factors that hinder access to equal educational opportunity generally, it might be necessary to discuss elaborately the barriers to educational opportunity in Nigeria.

Barriers to Equality of Educational Opportunity in Nigeria

Despite a number of measures, various governments, at all levels have made to offset educational imbalance in Nigeria, it has been observed that inequalities still exist. Various reasons have been adduced for these lapses. These include:

i) Individual Differences amongst pupils

Individual differences amongst pupils pose a barrier to equal educational opportunity in Nigeria. The educational system does not take cognisance of the ability and aptitude of the individual pupils enrolled into our educational institution. Abolishing fees, providing common curricula, equipping schools with adequate instructional materials are not enough criteria for meeting educational needs of every child in a given society. Critics see the provision of a common curriculum as injustice since it is deemed unfair to give the same dose of education to two pupils with different aptitudes and interests. Put in another way, it is a barrier rather than creating equality of educational opportunity, subjecting the same curriculum to both the mentally retarded and the normal child. In the same vein, it is rather absurd subjecting the same curriculum to both the normal child and the gifted child. What is needed is a diversified curriculum which would cater for the different aptitudes and abilities of individual pupils.

ii) Selection Method

No country has succeeded in establishing the number of educational institutions that can absorb all children of school going age and their different abilities and interests. Hence the introduction of common examinations such as state and national selection examinations and the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME), used to select candidates into limited number of educational institutions in Nigeria. Such selection procedures based on merit encourage inequality instead of equality since those who are unable to pass these competitive examinations are deprived of their right to attend educational institutions of their choice. Regrettably, however, the children of the rich who have been specially prepared by attending high fee paying schools pass such examination easily.

iii) The Quota System of Admission

The application of the quota system of admission involves the principle of discriminating against prospective

university candidates, simply because they happen to be citizens of certain states of the federation. The policy according to proponents is to narrow the widening gap in education development of the South and the North. The advocates of the quota system of admission to higher institutions of learning argue that the system helps to remove any sense of suspicion, domination and exclusion of certain ethnic groups if aptly applied. According to them it would enhance national unity to admit students from all states of the federation to federal tertiary institutions to enable the youths to learn and interact together.

On the other hand, the exponents of the quota system of admission see the great emphasis attached to one's place of birth as destabilizing instead of promoting unity in Nigeria. These critics query the offering of admissions to candidates with lower scores to the detriment of other candidates with higher scores just because they happen to come from different states. They claim that candidates who are cheated by their nation may consequently grow up indisciplined. They are of the view that the quota system of admissions consciously enthrones mediocrity, irrationality and injustice, since a well deserving candidate is robbed of his opportunity, all in the name of quota system.

iv) Unaffordable Costs/Transition Rate from Primary to Secondary

Poverty is one of the greatest threats to high quality education in any given country. The National Policy on Education (1981) stipulates a hundred percent transition rate from primary to secondary schools, but the country is yet to achieve this. Even where primary education is technically free in most states of the federation, additional charges for uniforms, textbooks and transport fares to schools create financial barriers for many parents. These parents consistently claim that these indirect costs are hindrances for sending their children to school.

In addition, many citizens argue that primary education certificates can hardly fetch a paid employment. They should rather be made to understand that it is a first step up the educational ladder. In Rivers State, First School Leaving Certificates are listed among certificates to be sighted before any job in the State Civil Service is offered to any employee. This makes the availability of the certificate a must for future educational success.

The inability of governments to ensure a hundred percent transition from primary to secondary does not augur well for our educational growth. It is a barrier to equality of educational opportunity in Nigeria.

v) Gender Discrimination

Girls in Nigeria face sets of barriers to equal educational opportunity. These include child marriage, early pregnancy, domestic labour and human trafficking. According to Wikipedia Online Press, Nigeria is a source, transit, and destination country for women and children subjected to trafficking in persons. It further states that trafficked Nigerian women and children are recruited from rural areas within the country's borders – women and girls for involuntary domestic servitude and forced commercial sexual exploitation, and boys for forced labour in street vending, domestic servitude, mining and begging.

In the far North, some muslim parents are reluctant, for cultural and religious reasons, to send their daughters to school. Even in the Southern part of the country, many parents are reluctant training their female children. Their reason is traceable to old customs and values which see female education as unnecessary as the womenfolk are deemed to have been designed for child birth and domestic chores for the husband to be. In addition, men's perception of the educated women as a 'threat' to them in politics and economy, has also made it difficult for families to train their daughters. These discriminations towards girl's education act as barriers as fewer girls enroll and many who do often times drop out of school.

The disparity between male and female gender education is amply displayed by the monopoly which men enjoy in the higher level of the economy and polity. This explains why it is common seeing Nigerians sending their sons to school before the daughters are considered. There is however a reverse in this trend in some states of the federation where female pupils far outnumber their male counterparts.

There is need to sustain the reverse trend bearing in mind that increase in girl education reduces birth rates which in turn improve quality of life for many families.

vi) Humanitarian Emergencies and Armed Conflicts as Barriers

The devastating effects of armed conflicts and humanitarian emergencies have a big roll on educational expansion in Nigeria. Thousands of children are forced out of school in conflicts affected states of the federation, and several hundreds of thousands are forced out of school by natural disasters each year. During the flood disasters of 2012 – 2014, only a small percentage of humanitarian aids were directed towards education.

The current Boko Haram insurgency in North-East Nigeria has encouraged attacks on children, widespread rape of girls and women, and systematic destruction of school facilities. Sexual terror is used as a strong weapon of war. The forceful kidnapping of over 200 Chibok girls from a girls school in Borno State has made frontline news in major cities of the world. Hence sexual terror is inflicting untold hardships, fear and insecurity on young girls and women, thus untold damage on their education. Children are forcefully recruited

as child soldiers and often times used as shields during combatants. Classrooms, teachers and pupils are prime targets. The consequence is fear on the part of children to attend classes, fear among teachers to teach and fear among parents to send their wards to school. In addition, armed conflicts in Nigeria divert public funds from education into military spending.

vii) Limited Admission Spaces/The Problems of Carrying Capacity

A major barrier to access to universities in Nigeria is carrying capacity of the universities. There is a surging demand for university education in Nigeria. As a result, the universities need to be expanded in terms of infrastructure, facilities and manpower to meet the teeming students population seeking admission. The National Universities Commission (NUC), the regulatory authority at a time found out that many universities were overpopulated and facilities overstretched. This informed the introduction of the carrying capacity to ensure that students are admitted based on the facilities available. According to Henry Divine (2011) these facilities include adequate lecture rooms, well stocked libraries, good staff/student ratio, accommodation, etc. According to him this policy was to enhance quality but has become an impediment to access to university education. The reasons are not far-fetched.

According to Adesun (2014), in 2010/2011, Nigeria had 112 universities with carrying capacity of 450,000 and 1,493,611 applicants. The admitting capacity was 30.13 percent of the total number of applicants. He further stated that in the 2011/2012 session, five universities were added, bringing the number (of universities) to 117, with 500,000 carrying capacity amounting to 33.25 percent and 1,503,933 applied that year. Ironically in 2012/2013 session when 11 universities were added bringing the number to 128, the carrying capacity was 520,000 (29.96%) when a total of 1,735,729 applied for university spaces.

The question is what happens to the teeming masses who are denied university education every year as a result of inadequate facilities? The truth of the matter is that a good percentage of students who meet the UTME cut-off marks cannot access the tertiary institutions in the country as a result of carrying capacity quota allocations to universities.

Possible Solutions

1. Instead of establishing more universities, federal government should empower universities to develop their virtual universities. It is interesting to note that university of India has a student population of over 10 million. This population was accommodated by their virtual university to take care of those students who are unable to get admission into regular universities.
Distance learning Education as practiced in the National Open University of Nigeria should be encouraged. Universities of Ibadan and Lagos which operate dual mode, regular students and open distance learning programmes, should have their virtual learning facilities expanded to enable each of them admit over one million students annually.
Increasing the quota allocation given to universities in the bid to increase their carrying capacities would only mean overstressing the existing infrastructure in those universities. Effective learning and teaching, it should be noted cannot take place, in our crowded classroom.
2. In the cases of increasing insurgency and armed conflicts in Nigeria, government must ensure that displaced youths do not lose out in their schooling. Recent destruction of classrooms and kidnap of students from their school environments could be stemmed if state and para-military security men, man the school gates of the worst affected states. Closed circuit television (CCTV) cameras could also be mounted in such schools to track the infiltration of suicide bombers who have of recent been having a field day dressing like the regular students and blowing up themselves, thereby killing and maiming scores of innocent students in the North-East of Nigeria.
Students who are displaced by insurgency must be made to access educational opportunities through the recently inaugurated Safe School Initiative (SSI) of the Federal Government. Emergency schools facilities must be provided and teachers recruited to teach them around the various refugee camps where they and their parents are being rehabilitated.
Schools located at the border towns where fighting is ongoing should be provided with perimeter fencing and security patrols provided to protect both teachers and students.
3. Gender inequality is still high in the North Eastern part of Nigeria. Situations where the role of women has been relegated to child bearing and domestic chores does not fit the modern practice in the civilized world. Human potentials of girls and women are undermined and their creativity is diminished.
A total war should be declared to reverse the trend. Recruitment of under-aged boys and girls for involuntary domestic servitude and forced labour must be discouraged. Street trading by young boys and girls of school age should be prohibited by national legislation.
4. Unaffordable costs arising from transport costs to schools outside the pupil's neighbourhood, charges for their school uniforms and textbooks should be taken care of by government if education is free at

the primary level. More classrooms should be built to eliminate overcrowding, class sizes should be cut down and long travel distances to school reduced. Many parents are afraid to release their daughters for schooling where pupils walk one or two hours to schools. Efforts should also be made to refurbish dilapidated classrooms and as a rule pupils should not be allowed to sit under trees to learn.

5. Quota system of admissions into tertiary institutions in Nigeria should be scrapped as it seen as a barrier instead of enthrone equality of access to educational institutions. It enthrone mediocrity and promotes injustice rather than equity as envisaged by its proponents.
6. Curriculum designers should aim at diversified curriculums to cater for children with different aptitudes and interests. The current unified curriculum practiced in the country is a cog in the wheels of equalizing efforts of government to educational opportunities.

Conclusion

It has been seen that ethnic rivalries and hostilities in Nigeria reflect competition over access to national benefits such as employment opportunities, establishment of new universities and other services. This compels educational system in Nigeria to serve contradictory roles. While the system permits a small number of children from modest backgrounds to achieve varying degrees of upward mobility, the new elite class assists to perpetuate and deepen social inequalities between the privileged and the under-privileged classes. As a result education only acts as a catalyst, guaranteeing the reproduction of the existing inequalities. In other words, all that our educational system is doing at present is to deepen already extremely high level of social inequality.

Government at different levels is trying its best to reverse the trend. How far it can succeed in removing the deeply entrenched barriers to equality of access to educational opportunity in the country is a feat which may take many years to achieve.

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