

Philosophical Assessment of Liberal Education and the Actualization of Free and Compulsory Basic Education in Nigeria

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Abstract. This paper philosophically assessed liberal education and the actualization of free education in Nigeria. Liberal education was conceived as free education from the Latin etymology, “liber” or “liberalis”. It is an education that broadens the learner’s knowledge for the purpose of liberating him from ignorance, illiteracy, indoctrination, dogmatism and poverty of knowledge. Besides the above, the issue of free and compulsory education in Nigeria was expounded in connection to the present Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme in Nigeria which has its roots from Universal Primary Education (UPE). To this end, references were made to the relevant sections of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the National Policy on Education (NPE) as well as the Universal Basic Education Commission’s flagship programme document. It was discovered that the free and compulsory basic education at the moment has not been able to liberate young Nigerians from poverty of knowledge, dogmatism and indoctrination, considering the actualization of its objectives. Constraints to the actualization of free and compulsory education in Nigeria were identified as corruption, inadequate funding and ethno-religious and political crises among others. Recommendations were therefore made in respect to the constraints which include the call on government to sincerely intensify the fight against corruption, particularly in our educational system, priority should be given to proper funding of education through sufficient budgetary allocations among others. Finally, it was concluded that Nigeria was passing through the wind of change politically, socially and economically. Therefore we need a form of education that will liberate us from certain dogmas, illiteracy and indoctrinations as explicated in the paper.

1. Introduction

Education is a catalyst for the development every sentient Society. The crave for it has inspired every legitimate government of the World to lay claim to its attainment by the citizens of such nations of as one of the key levers that propel economic and political development. Consequently, chunk of such countries budgetary allocations are channeled to the provision of quality education.

From the above, various policies and programmes are embarked upon to ensure that educational opportunities are provided for easy access to education by citizens of the nations concerned. For example, the Nigerian government in 1976 embarked on an educational programme tagged the Universal Free Primary Education (UPE) as a national education programme after its successful implementation by the then Western Regional Government in Nigeria in 1955 (Fafunwa, 1974) and (Ogunsanmi, 2014).

In 2004, the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) was established by an Act of the National Assembly. The Act provides for “Compulsory, Free Universal Basic Education for all children of primary and junior secondary school age in the Federal Republic of Nigeria” (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004:1). All these efforts are geared towards making education accessible to Nigerians, hence liberal education which is expected to be free in actual sense in order to achieve this feat.

2. Liberal Education

Etymologically, the concept “liberal” is a derivation of the Latin words “liber” or “liberalis”, meaning free or Freedom or Liberty (Dictionary.com 2017). Accordingly, the Wikipedia (2017) has conceived liberal education as a “system or course of education

suitable for the cultivation of free human being". The defining characteristic in the above conception of liberal education is freedom which is the ability of an individual to make choices devoid of certain constraints. However, in the real sense of freeness, human beings cannot be limitlessly free to choose to act the way they so wish without any form of constraint(s). This is because if freedom entails acting without constraint(s), the society is then exposed to eminent anarchy. Accordingly, Musa (2008) aptly argued that "if we are to boundlessly act, we are at liberty to act wrongly even if it is at the expense of other society members who favour right action and have equal freedom to do so". Unconstraint freedom implies wrong justification of religious and political extremism, for example, which culminate into acts of terrorism and assassinations. Describing further, the Wikipedia (2017) contended that

Liberal education is a philosophy of education that empowers individuals with broad knowledge and transferable skills, and a stronger sense of values, ethics, and civic engagement characterized by challenging encounters with important issues, and more a way of studying than a specific course or field of study.

From the foregoing, liberal education is concerned with broadening a person's general knowledge and experience rather than strictly with technical or professional experience. It is aimed at liberating the mind from the imprisonment of dogmatic indoctrinations which could be political, religious or even cultural as the case may be in the present dispensation of religious and political intriguing and ethnic divides.

It is necessary in this discourse to have a brief historical philosophical analysis of liberal education as put forward by Schofield (1974: 149-150). This will provide us with clearer understanding. The Greeks were concerned primarily with the consideration that human personality should develop freely and should be guided by reason rather than by some limited constraints on the belief in individual rights and moral freedom and responsibilities. Contrarily, the minds of the Eastern people were full of superstition and timidity that hampered individual development unlike their Greek counterpart.

In the Western world, as obtainable in the Middle Ages, the doctrine and dogma of the Church were constraints on individual thinking and freedom of thought. In this

case, people acted blindly in outright obedience, not because of the fact that they were guided by reason. The Greeks were concerned, on the other hand, to free the mind from error, believing in the intellectual freedom that would culminate into rational decision making towards issues pertaining life.

Intellectual freedom allows an individual to engage in argument to its logical conclusion in the light of rational reasoning. As for the Greeks, it was reason and not the dictates of the church which directed behaviours. It is in this perspective that Socrates contended that knowledge is virtue and an individual cannot commit evil willingly. By this token, he meant that reason frees the mind from ignorance and when an individual knows what is wrong and right, he will implicitly do what is right because to do any wrong is not rational. Socrates may be challenged on this position. How for instance can Socrates explain why corruption, ethno-religious crises and political violence are still prevalent in Nigeria today in spite of our level of educational attainment as a country? Are the perpetrators or their sponsors not knowledgeable on what is right and wrong? Could it be that our education system is not liberal enough to free us from ignorance and poverty of the knowledge of ethical values?

In the present dispensation, it is pertinent to assert that education aims at making an individual to make free choices concerning morality, for instance, instead of making responses without actual understanding the reason(s) for such choices, education in this perspective becomes a liberating agent for the individual, hence liberal education according to Schofield (1974) "is education for its sake and not for what it is used for. It is an intrinsic form of education that is valuable in itself quite apart from any utilitarian considerations."

3. Universal Basic Education in Nigeria: A Form of Liberal Education?

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) in Nigeria can be originally traced to the Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme which was initially launched by the then Western Region Government led by the Premier of the old Western Region, Obafemi Awolowo in 1955 (Fafunwa 1974). This led to the launch of the programme by the then Military Government led by Olusegun Obasanjo in 1976 after its success in the Western Region. Like in the West, the programme witnessed massive school enrolment of children and employment of teachers to ensure that children had access to tuition free primary education as reported by

Adewole in Gbari (2014). The programme failed as a result of inadequate funding by the very architect of the programme, the Federal Government (Gbari, 2014).

The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria has made provision for free and compulsory basic education amongst other educational objectives. It provides as follows:

- Government shall direct its policy towards ensuring that there are equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels.
- Government shall strive to eradicate illiteracy; and to this end, government shall as and when practicable provide:
- Free, compulsory and universal primary education;
- Free secondary education
- Free universal education; and
- Free adult and literacy programme (FRN, UBE, 2004:1)

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) was launched in 1999, precisely in Sokoto and enacted into law in 2004 by an Act of the National Assembly; known as the Compulsory, Free Basic Education Act 2014 (FRN, NPE 2009). According to the Federal Republic of Nigeria, (2009), Basic education is the education given to children aged 0-15 years. It encompasses early Childhood Education (0-5). This is segmented into 0-3 years situated in daycare or crèches fully in the hands of private sector and social development service whilst ages 3-5 are within the formal education sector and 9 years of formal schooling. However, in consonance with the NPE and the relevant laws, the UBE is aimed at:

- Ensuring an uninterrupted access to 9 year formal education by providing free, compulsory UBE for every child of school going age.
- Reducing school drop-out and improving relevance, quality and efficiency; and
- Acquisition of literacy, numeracy, life skills and values for life-long education and useful living. (FRN, 2004:1).

The Federal Government however, noted on the legal justification of the UBE that even though the Constitution has imposed a duty on all the three tiers of Government to strive to eradicate illiteracy and provide free and compulsory basic education, this Educational Objectives is non-justiciable. In other words, the provisions of that Section cannot be challenged or

enforced in any Court of law by any person or authority (FRN, UBEC, 2004:2).

In response to the question raised earlier on whether UBE is a form of liberal education, in the opinion of this paper based on the objectives of the UBE as stated earlier in this work vis- a- vis liberal education, UBE is of course a form of liberal education since its objectives are anchored on acquisition of literacy, numeracy, life skills and values for lifelong education and useful living among other objectives as discussed earlier, which is aimed at liberating the mind from illiteracy, ignorance, indoctrination, dogmatism and idle mindedness which is often described as the devil's workshop. This culminates into rational decision making which liberal education stands for.

4. Assessment of the Free and Compulsory Basic Education Programme Initiative in Nigeria

The issues concerning education in Nigeria are clearly embedded in the concurrent list in respect to areas of jurisdiction as far as education is concerned. What this means is that all the tiers of government namely federal, states and local government areas can legislate on matters relating to education in the country. This explains the crucial role education plays in the life of a nation such that it cannot be left in the hands of only a tier of government.

It is on the basis of the above that the Nigerian government passed the compulsory education law in which children within certain age range must attend school provided that they are of school going age as stipulated by the law establishing the UBE programme. Compulsory education therefore refers to a period of educational attendance required of all students (learners) which is imposed by law and the period of compulsory education is determined by the student's age (Wikipedia, 2017). However, if the government considers itself as the protector of the rights of children by which it justifies making education compulsory, this is commendable but as it were, it should be done in consultation with the children and where the government single handedly imposes the compulsion law, it becomes unprogressive (Musa 2006).

In addition to the position of the government pronouncement that education is free, it is also compulsory. This is self contradictory because it is difficult to discern that something is free and yet compulsory at the same time. The policy statement in

the UBE Act stipulates penalties for parents who fail to comply with its provision on grounds that education is compulsory. In the light of this, for instance, on first conviction, a parent is to be reprimanded; on second conviction, to a fine of two thousand naira (#2,000:00) or imprisonment for a term of one month or both and on subsequent conviction, to a fine of five thousand naira (#5,000:00) or imprisonment for a term of two months or to both (FRN, UBEC 2004). In consideration of the above, how many parents or guardians have been prosecuted so far for failing to send their children to school compulsorily in compliance to the stipulated UBE Act?

In a similar development, if the Government is to prosecute parents who fail to send their children to school and subsequently asserts that it (government) cannot be challenged in court for failing to implement the compulsory education programme according to the relevant laws, then the implementation of the compulsory education will be very difficult if not impossible as it has become the case of do as I say but not as I do, since the law maker and implementer is above the law as no provision is made for the Government or its Agencies to be prosecuted for failing on its own part to implement the compulsory education as a matter of expediency. This is already a form of injustice in the pursuit of justice for the Nigerian child if the compulsory education programme is actually aimed at making him access basic education in order to liberate him from illiteracy and ignorance as a matter of right.

Concerning the area of the implementation of the compulsory education, Musa (2006) argued that “like free primary education, the compulsory education ends up in policy documents that are yet to be implemented. The reason is that it remains a common thing to see children of school age hawking various things on the streets during school hours”. This is in addition to engagement of the children in activities such as farming, hunting, bus conductors, European football gambling such as surebet, accessbet and 9jabet, errand boys and girls as well as wheel barrow pushing during school hours. Impliedly, this category of Nigerian population that forms the future of this country is simply out of school. Supporting this, the global data recently released by UNESCO as quoted by Tayo (2017) shows that “an estimated 61 million children of primary school age are being denied their right to education. Nigeria alone is home to an estimated 10.5million out of school children”. With the above

scenario in our hands, how compulsory is the free education when many children who are the target group of the programme have no access to the basic education? But then, what could be the cause of the above scenario?

Responding to the above question, Musa (2006) opined that “because of the prevailing unemployment saga, a parent might want his child to learn occupations like carpentry, brick-laying or road-side mechanic” which in the view of the parent would be more important than sending the child to school which gestation period is too long for its benefits to be enjoyed compared to the aforementioned occupations. This aside, ignorance can also cause a parent to withhold his child from primary education and the subsequent levels that build on it (Musa 2006). Accepting this view, Adewale, while quoting Helvetius as cited by Musa (2006) affirmed that “parents who are ignorant of the value of education believe that children are born ignorant, not stupid: it is formal education that makes them stupid”. In a situation where children are ignorant and do not have knowledge such that is provided in the formal school system, they remain comfortable since they are not aware of their plight that calls for liberation, a situation the UBE programme stands to fight against.

From the above position, for the implementation of the compulsory education to be possible, massive awareness campaign on the value of education to the individual and the society needs to be carried out on a very wide range across the country, especially among the ignorant population. No doubt, the lack or inadequate awareness campaign could be part of the reasons that accounts for the difficulty presently encountered in the implementation of the UBE programme in Nigeria.

Owing to poverty level of the people, according to Musa as quoted by Gbari (2014), “the National Policy on Education calls for compulsory education at the basic level along with free tuition fee. The assumption is the removal of the tuition fee will reduce the burden from the parents. On the other hand according to him, the tuition fee amounts to only 2% of the total cost of education”. There are other incidental costs such as PTA, sports, laboratory, uniforms, books, health and science levies among other financial obligations which constitute over 90% of the child’s expenses in education which are borne by the parents. With the above situation can we say that education is free indeed and such that

can achieve the UBE objectives and thereby liberate the children from poverty of knowledge?

In some states in Nigeria, governments have returned schools to their original owners, mostly religious organizations, private individuals and corporate organizations with the view to raise moral standards of the citizens. What is the implication of these steps in implementing the UBE programme? Are these schools also free when their owners are expected to raise funds to foot the wage bills of their workers for services rendered, especially teachers? Can the government also compel the proprietors of private schools all over the country to provide free education programme in a free and democratic nation like Nigeria that guarantees freedom of ownership of enterprises, as provided in the nation's NPE?

5. Constraints to the Actualization of Free and Compulsory Liberal Universal Basic Education in Nigeria

The implementation of the free education programme in Nigeria which is expected to be compulsory as well has become a mirage owing to some teething factors that militate against its actualization. These factors which are otherwise referred to as constraints are discussed below.

Corruption: This is a general phenomenon in Nigeria which cuts across almost all sectors of the economy and education in particular is not an exception. For instance, funds that are appropriated for the execution of educational programmes are either misappropriated or embezzled for personal and selfish interests by relevant authorities vested with such responsibility of executing the laudable programmes, thereby frustrating the implementation of Universal Basic Education programme in the country. Bringing this down to the school system, for instance, Musa (2006) noted that “the corruption of continuous assessment practice gives birth to fake school leaving certificate results, which are in turn wrongly used in placing primary school leavers into secondary schools”. This explains why children who complete junior secondary schools in their large number cannot construct simple sentence properly or write a simple letter, not to talk of answering questions from given comprehension passages in English Language in spite of their very good scores obtained that earned them placements into senior secondary schools after writing the Basic Certificate Examination (BECE).

Funding: Virtually, no sector of the economy can function optimally without funding. The issue of funding education in Nigeria is so pathetic. In fact this issue has been one of the reasons of ASUU, ASUUP and COEASU strikes in this country in addition to many industrial actions by secondary and primary schools teachers for the same reason. In this guise, even if education is tuition free and learners are adequately provided all they need in order to learn smoothly, and the welfare of teachers is not accorded significant priority as at when due, we will still have problem because it is not only about learners, but the whole system of education. This apart, the UBE programme is a tripartite venture involving the Federal, States and Local Government Councils. Instances abound of some states not being able to make their counterpart contributions to the UBE joint purse as provided by the Act establishing it as envisaged in the criteria for accessing and utilization of the UBE matching grant. This has left many states incapacitated to access the accumulated funds for their respective states and Local Government Councils which has hampered the smooth actualization of the free and compulsory education in the country.

Ethno-Religions and Political Crises: The Country is engulfed by incessant crises of different types and varying magnitudes. Examples of such crises include those orchestrated by the Islamic religious sect known as “Boko Haram” which means Western education is forbidden, herdsman versus farmers’ clashes, Niger Delta militancy, Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) agitation and the recent killings in Southern parts of Kaduna. The nefarious activities of the aforementioned have led to the loss of human lives, property, livestock, and many farmlands/produce. The insecurity situation has turned many people, mostly women and children to refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), in their large numbers in various refugees’ camps. In some instances, schools are used as refugees’ camps. The resultant effect of this is that, many children are out of school and the hope for basic education to liberate them from mental, psychological, political and economic bondage as well as ignorance through liberal education is in serious doubt.

Inadequate Qualified Teachers: In many instances, teachers are not available to teach in the UBE schools. Affirming this position, the UBE flagship programme of the Federal Government (2004) asserted that the “UBE

programme is in dire need of 40,000 qualified teachers.” Accordingly, Musa and Isa (2017) noted that “even the available ones may not be qualified to teach in Junior Secondary Schools talk more of Senior Secondary Schools”. Apart from the above, in some instances teachers are employed by parents under the Parents Teachers Association (PTA) to augment the shortage of manpower situation in schools. Some of these teachers do not have the requisite academic backgrounds to teach. For instance, they cannot break the scheme of work, write lesson plan, mark and compute class attendance register. Yet the schools are owned and controlled by the government under the free and compulsory programme initiative.

Dearth of infrastructure constitutes another constraint to the actualization of free education in the country. In some states of the federation, governments establish schools by mere pronouncement to that effect. The burden of building classrooms, offices, provision of teaching and learning materials, (such as books, chalk, and instructional materials), toilet facilities, sports equipments, and many more are borne by the parents under the auspices of Parents Teachers Association (PTA). The issue of infrastructural development in Nigerian schools is so pathetic that teachers, especially at the primary and secondary levels, it is common to see them striving to cope with learners under trees and dilapidated classrooms with the learners sitting on the floor if at all the classrooms are provided (Isa 2015, pp.181-182).

Poor teachers’ remunerations constitute a threat to smooth implementation of free education in Nigeria. Often times, the salaries of teachers, especially at the primary school level, which according to Isa (2015), “are delayed for many months before being paid. This is done only in the face of strike actions embarked by the teachers as last option to press home the demand of their legitimate entitlements.” The issue of paying teachers’ salaries in percentages at the primary school level in some states including Nasarawa has further compounded the problems faced in actualizing the free and compulsory liberal education in Nigeria. The issue now has become that of percentage salary, percentage work and such is the situation at the moment in some states of the federation as earlier pointed out. The Nigerian child is always at the receiving end, considering the above scenario.

6. Conclusion

Nigeria is a signatory to the UN Resolution on education as a right of the world citizens. Affirming this position, the country clearly spelt out in the constitution, the NPE and the UBE Act that education is free. This is with the view of actualizing the dream of making education accessible to all her citizens as a matter of right hence the free and compulsory education policy initiative, particularly at the primary and junior secondary level. Unfortunately, this is far from being achieved as envisaged in the discussion in this paper.

7. Recommendations

Having assessed the educational situation in the country against the backdrop of the provision of liberal education through the free and compulsory education policy of the Nigerian government, and the attendant constraints as expounded in this article, the following recommendations are made:

- Government should sincerely intensify the fight against corruption, particularly in our educational system. Funds budgeted for the execution of education projects and programmes should be judiciously channeled for such purposes. Saboteurs should be justly prosecuted through the relevant laws of the land.
- Government should give priority to the funding of education through sufficient budgetary allocation to the sector as recommended by UNESCO which advocated for 26% of the entire budgets of all nations of the world to be allocated to education.
- There should be clearer redefinition of “free and compulsory education”, where implementation can be possible. The position of government should be clear and understandable. For instance, is it free education or tuition free education? If education is compulsory and erring parents are expected to be prosecuted, why would Government not be prosecuted for erring too? This is because the legal justification of the UBE Act has prohibited Nigerians from prosecuting the government when it fails to provide free and compulsory education to Nigerians of school age as matter of duty.
- On the issue of ethno-religious and political crises, government should intensify and

expedite efforts to bring an end to these ugly trends. No meaningful progress can be achieved, especially in terms of provision of liberal (free) education in an unsecured atmosphere of the country. Perpetrators should be faithfully prosecuted according to the relevant laws.

- Qualified teachers should be employed. This is besides good remunerations so as to boost their morale and also to prevent the brain-drain syndrome where teachers who are really qualified to teach leave the teaching work for other seemingly greener pasture elsewhere.
- Those state Governments that refuse to pay their counterpart UBE funds to the joint UBE purse should be compelled to make such contributions so as to enable them access the accumulated funds. This may be done through the Act of the National Assembly to that effect.
- The absence, near absence or poor infrastructural situation can be improved through patriotic and pragmatic approach by the government which can be done through building of infrastructures in schools beyond mere pronouncement of establishment of schools without any efforts to provide structures and other needs of the schools, so as to improve the quality of education in the country.
- The issue of automatic promotion of learners to the next class should be revisited to ensure quality. Pupils/Students should, as a matter of quality educational policy, be made to repeat if they cannot perform to expectation. Once learners know they will be promoted to the next class automatically even if they fail, they will not take their study serious, since failing examination will not deter them from moving to the next class.

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