

Rethinking Strategies in Nigerian Philosophy of Education: Domesticating Ideas of Educational Thinkers for Sustainable National Unity and Development

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Abstract

Critics of the Nigerian system of education have tended to see it as colonial inheritance, perpetuated by the agents of imperialism. Unfortunately while there has been widespread disenchantment with the inherited curriculum, leading to some degree of success in indigenisation, questions challenging the continued advance of western educational ideas have been nearly absent. We often fail to realize that ideas shape practice. The paper therefore, argues that no matter what efforts we make at changing practice, unless the ideas which influence such a practice are addressed, our efforts may not adhere much on the desired direction. The paper advocates that ideas of educational thinkers of the west is not sufficient to make us appreciate the dynamic of our educational system, but rather the way these ideas have been interpreted and applied by our native great thinkers and the resultant impact in our educational system, should also find a place in our curriculum and education policies. The paper however, did not take a stand in the debate other than drawing some educational implications posing challenges to Nigerian educators, particularly the philosophers of education.

Introduction

Despite the apparent value of philosophy to humanity the discipline appears to be at its lowest ebb. Philosophy of education like major philosophy is being branded as aesthetic enterprise with a tendency towards obscurantism and often seen as irrelevant in our society because the area is often confused with the study of educational ideas of the grandmasters philosophers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, John Lock, J. J. Rousseau, etc¹. This is in spite of the fact that philosophy mothered all academic discipline with its persistent employment of the rational faculty². This criticisms are not a recent development as calls for indigenization of curricula have been a familiar refrain since the colonial days.

¹. Bamisaiye in Bagudo A. A. (2006). *Philosophical Foundations of Education*, Ibadan-Nigeria: Saniez Books.

². Bagudo A. A. (2015). *Evolution of Nigerian Philosophy of Education: Lead Paper Presented at the Conference of Philosophy of Education Association of Nigeria Held at Nasarawa State University, Keffi.*

Against this background, it is easy to understand the effort of Phelps-Stokes committee, memorandum on education in British colonial territories and 1969 National curriculum conference as watersheds in the history of educational development in Nigeria. After these the 1977 National Policy on Education were formulated which was preceded by the 1973 National seminar on education as a follow-up to the 1969 conference.

What we call education however is far more than the curriculum content. It includes such things as the philosophy upon which every curriculum is based, and the social, political and cultural environment upon which the institution of education has to continually interact with. These concerns are the foundations of education. As a matter of fact, Nigeria did not only inherit curriculum from her colonial masters, but also inherited a system of ideas, unfortunately, while there has been widespread disenchantment with the inherited curriculum, questions challenging the continued relevance of western educational ideas that shapes our practice of education has been nearly absent from the education stakeholders.

Failure to consider the social origin of the various actions and policies that continually shape our educational system makes our efforts to understand the system of education less successful in achieving the desired direction. This is not to say that the ideas of some great western thinkers are totally irrelevant to inform our educational effort. However, the point is that these ideas have been interpreted and applied by our own great thinkers and the resulted impact on our educational system. Although it is conceded that there are limitations to adopting educational ideas of our founding fathers, due to the heterogeneous nature of the country, therefore collecting ideas should also find a place in our curriculum.

Just as Plato in Hellenic Greece, Jean Jacques Rousseau 18th century France and John Dewey in 19th century America, were recognized for their great ideas, which were responses to certain circumstances of their times, so there is the need to understand the idea of our own great thinkers as they also respond to some of our problems. This is very important without discarding the contributing ideas of western great thinkers which Akinpelu argued in favour of their study in philosophy of education. To buttress his point he argued that the thought of these thinkers were squarely within education; they inform us of the roots of education; and that educational problems seem to be perennial to the extent that the same questions on education seem to reappear from age to age³. However, this paper attempt to redirect our consciousness to an already existing body of ideas which directly or indirectly have some relevance in domesticating our educational

³. Akinpelu in Bagudo A. A. (2006). *Philosophical Foundations of Educations*, Ibadan-Nigeria: Saniez Books

system and philosophical ideas on education. Above all, most of their ideas are also in agreement with the responses of great western thinkers to certain circumstances of their time⁴.

Nigerian Educational Thinkers and the Country's Educational Terrain

The relevance of domesticating the study of educational thinkers is to enable an appreciation of the solution that have been offered in the past to the problematic aspect of our system or to have an intelligent understanding of those problems by becoming acquainted with their social origin. The problems that make up the terrain for instance includes: disparities in educational development along geographical, cultural, ethnics and religious background, which dated back to the advent of western education in Nigeria. The problem of educational disparity still bedevils Nigerian's entire social fabric as a result of the effect of combined factors of slave trade, missionary activities and colonialism in Nigeria. Consequently the conflicting ideas of bridging the gap between educationally advantaged and educationally disadvantaged states by expanding educational opportunities to them on one hand and the need for uncontrollable expansion of educational opportunities for the educationally advantages group on the other hand. In the process we also battle with the problems of quality and the issue of education for all (universal basic education) as well as increase access to higher education in the wake of financial crises to adequately fund our education.

In spite of the above, the desire to achieve rapid social, economic, scientific and technological development has also posed a challenge for substantial restructuring of the school curriculum at all levels from a predominantly literary one to more emphasis on skill acquisition. In responses to these problems, most of our founding fathers have provided some of the arguments and their educational thoughts that gave rise either to our perception or solution of some of the problems. These problems and their social origin can be better understood in order to offer better alternatives to the problems.

Against this background the paper examined the ideas of Nnamdi Azikwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Ahmadu Bello and Aminu Kano in relation to their arguments on the issue of educational imbalance as a threat to national unity, the quantity and quality controversy and the problems of education for national development.

⁴. Usman, M. & Arzika, M. K. (2015). Women Education and social Reformation: Abdullahi Fodiyo's Recipe, *Nigerian Journal of Educational Philosophy*, (NJEP), 26 (1): 36-40, ISSN: 0794-0114, October.

Nigerian Educational Thinkers on the Issue of Educational Imbalance and National Unity

While there is agreement on the efficacy of the principle of equalization measures in education, the means of achieving it are far apart. For instance at the one extreme Zik and Awolowo who interpreted equalization strictly in terms of offering matching-grants and increased resources over a given period for disadvantaged states to increase on their output of qualified individuals. Basic to this proposal is the understanding that quality should not be sacrificed at the expense of catching up. Aminu Kano and Ahmadu Bello, on the other hand favoured a more even distribution of school places through the adoption of such measures as a quota system of selection in addition to even geographical distribution of educational institutions. However, to Awolowo, what seems to be the best solution of the problem of the numerically inferior backward areas, in his view will not undermine the free and compulsory primary education is that:

The educational gap between the western states and the northern states is too wide for comfort--- it cannot be closed by trying to halt the forward march of the western and eastern states as someone had suggested ----. For one thing, this is an impossible proposition. For another, such an attempt would be certain to provide an emotional reaction of frightful proportions among those affected. The gap can only therefore, be closed by embarking now, throughout the country, on free and compulsory primary education, free and compulsory secondary education, and free education at post-secondary levels. If we do this now, the existing educational gap will be permanently closed in fifteen to twenty years' time⁵

This shows that Awolowo is not satisfied with the proposal of quota system as advanced by people like Ahmadu Bello, because to his view it would lead to a reverse discrimination of the advantaged states. But Awolowo's proposal also did not seem to be appreciated by Ahmadu Bello, who favours a policy of controlled educational expansion, not only at the primary level but at all levels. Writing specifically on primary education, he declared that:

⁵. Owolowo, O. in Enoch A. O. (1996). *Main Current in Nigerian Educational Thought*, Jos: Midland Press, p. 87.

We have no intention of encouraging indiscriminate expansion of senior primary education in order to gain cheap popularity. It is of course much cheaper, quicker, and in short-run more popular, to open primary schools without insisting that the teachers who will teach them have a proper training. But in the end, of course, such a policy would be fatal to our development. I wish that others thought the same way⁶.

Rejecting the issue of indiscriminate expansion of schools; Ahmadu Bello favours the adoption of a quota system as a federal character to ensure equal representation of all reforms regardless of their disadvantages or backwardness on the selection criteria. This was further supported by people like Jibril Aminu who believes that a quota system of admission is a perfectly legitimate means for providing university places. Merit according to him should not be seen as an isolated phenomenon, uninfluenced by extraneous factors while under emphasis on them (the factor) determining opportunity may only mask and perpetrate certain advantages. The heart of this argument is that to implement the principle of equal educational opportunity, without showing genuine concern for the need to ensure that all parts of the country were helped to realize their legitimate aspirations in higher education, amounts to a form of inequality of opportunity, which is lack of opportunity to develop potential ability in the presently disadvantaged groups.

There is therefore need to meet a state of equilibrium and strike balance between these opposing, but equally strong and important view points for achieving national unity and equal access and opportunities in education.

Nigeria Educational Thinkers and the Quantity-Quality Controversy

Nigerian educational thinkers are divided, there are those who are favourably disposed to quality in education and those whose inclination is towards making education accessible to a great majority. However, this is not to see them at the edges of the two extreme ends. Those that support quantity do not necessarily give their support at the expense of quality. Some believes on the middle course, as they argue that quantity and quality are not necessarily incompatible⁷

⁶. Bello, A. A. in Enoh, A. O. (1996). *Main Current in Nigerian Educational Thought*, (Jos: Midland Press, p. 127.

⁷. Fafunwa, A. B. in Enoh, A. O. (1996). *Main Current in Nigerian Educational Thought*, (Jos: Midland Press, p. 275.

To Ahmadu Bello, for instance, the issue of quality should be seriously considered at all levels of the education system, a belief which compels him not to introduce universal primary education without the requisite qualified teachers as quoted earlier. His strong believe in quality education was clearly expressed in his remark:

In a country such as ours, where the number of trained men and women are still small, maximum efficiency and competence is expected of them. These people are the spear head of our advance into modern nationhood, and it is our duty to keep the spear head sharp. Let there be no mistake, the challenge of the future will require the highest academic standard and achievements that we can attain. They cannot be inferior to the standard of any country in the world⁸.

The urge is undoubtedly to aim at qualitative education with the hope that those educated can be absolutely relied upon to provide lasting development. Constantly he maintained that numbers alone are not enough, and that what is to be considered more important, even in the face of the great demand for quantity, is the quality of those produced and their assurance in achieving the desired goals.

Ahmadu Bello is strongly convinced that if the educational system is to live up to its responsibility, a policy that concentrates on the training of those who are willing to justify the huge sacrifice being made on them is imperative. This is a clear admission to the fact that the institution of education has the specific responsibility of turning out society's competent individuals. It cannot be a place for leisure. On the other hand, Awolowos was more a keen and interested on the value of an enlightened citizenry for democracy to work, which he believes is silent over the issue of quality on the primary education level. Interestingly, he agreed that quality at higher levels of the system cannot be negotiated, a fact which has resulted on calls for controlled expansion and restricted opportunity for only the surest (students). But the issue here is can there be quality at the higher level of education if the foundation is not solid?

One issue that cannot be ignored in examining the quantity-quality controversy are the effects of the present 9-3-4 system to the overall quality of education, with the low quantity of our teachers and excessive centralization of the system, which

⁸. Bello A. in Enoh A. O. (1996). *Main Current in Nigerian Educational Thought*, (Jos: Midland Press, p. 125.

turns teachers into mere conformist of the established order rather than innovators and the ever increasing excessively large classes, has made learner-centered methods very intractable. This is further worsened by little motivation of teachers arising from their unfavourable conditions of service there by suppressing the creative instinct in them.

The failure of the education system can be attributed to its inability to maintain even the low rate level of quality products which involves ability to recall, write clearly and intelligently or even attain some competence in dealing with figures, the current Nigerian education system to this paper is probably leading to nowhere. Therefore, the need to look back for the far reaching ideas of our early education thinkers to find solution to our educational crisis is proposed.

Nigerian Educational Thinkers and the Issue of Education for National Development

To think that education can bring about substantial change in the current socio-economic structure of the society is to ignore the correspondence that exists between the school and the external relationships in the larger society. This is because all educational systems serve their respective societies such that the social, economic and political relationship of the educational sector will mirror closely those of the society of which they are part. There is consistent argument that education is a veritable tool for socio-economic development both at individual and national levels. Zik's education for economic determinism, with its emphasis on acquisition of skills and willingness to be engaged in useful labour, leads to the conclusion that material and social benefits are inevitable results. Awolowo, on his part, argues that education prevents individuals from remaining poor, while Aminu Kano's philosophy believed in education for social change. He criticized the method of teaching in his days which is characterized by. He wanted a more stimulating method which would make learners more creative in their thinking. Aminu Kano is a strong advocate of education for liberation. Liberation from leader's dictatorship, Autocracy and injustice from what he called opportunist from among the ruling class and politicians.

All these argument appear very compelling and credible largely because they conform to conventional theories. However, granted that those who are admitted to read school based courses and emerge successfully in the end, does not actually justify any investment in their functional competence education. For instance the whole idea of placing emphasis on science based courses in tertiary institutions while the problems of availability of competent candidates from lower levels connote false assumption that numbers imply progress. Virtually it is erroneous to match academic success with technological breakthrough arising from a warped

understanding of the inventive process. We must therefore come to terms with the fact that in science, for instance, there is need for other areas of creative output, rather than emphasizing on large number, a few number individual's, having the flair for and training in science, can surpass the collective effort of a thousand or more who lack that ability but with the same or higher level of training. It is evident that our universities had turn and large number of science, technical and engineering graduates who have not and cannot do anything.

Therefore, if we use quantitative index of our educational efforts –trained skill as the sole parameter of development, we may eventually encourage the gross mental view which sees education as little more than a mass production industry.

Domesticating Educational Thinkers Ideas and Evolution of Nigerian Philosophy of Education

The bulk of contribution of this paper should be it's fours on what and which issues real to be pinfused into the current system as way forward.

The paper should be categorical on its position after all the counter arguments provided, the rethinking strategies should be suggested and forwarded as a philosophical argument.

For any education system to be successful in achieving its aims, its educational theory and practice must be based on the existing educational terrain in that society as well as a sound understanding of the metaphysical, epistemological and ethical believes and desires of that society. That is to say there is need to establish a strong and relevant philosophical basis for our educational system. At the 1969 educational conference, it was observed that many advanced countries of the world have a philosophy of education geared towards their national aspiration. Consequently, it was observed that Nigeria should also decide on what should be her general philosophy of education. Currently our studies of educational ideas seem to be restricted to the understanding of western educational thinkers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and host of them⁹They do not seem to have equipped us sufficiently as a country, to understand and appreciate the dynamics of our educational system and Nigerian educational terrain. On the other hand, there exist a number of educational thinkers of Nigerian extraction and our country's founding fathers like Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Sir Ahmadu Bello, Malam Aminu Kano etc, who have individually and collectively canvassed on a wide range of educational issues like the problems of equalizing educational opportunities, national unity, quantity and quality in education and education for

⁹. Bagudo A. A. (2015). Evolution of Nigerian Philosophy of Education: Lead Paper Presented at the Conference of Philosophy of Education Association of Nigeria Held at Nasarawa State University, Keffi.

national development discussed inter alia. These indigenous thinkers were speaking to Nigerian audience on Nigerian educational scene as a Nigerian views in a Nigerian way unlike the thinkers of the western world who virtually are relating to their own serious.

However, despite the relevance of the ideas of these native thinkers to our education, the paper is not suggesting that we should throw away and forget the contributing ideas of the ancient philosophical thinkers on studying philosophy of education and in planning and understand our educational system. This is because like argued by Akinpelu¹⁰ we need to understand the roots of our educational system which originated from Greeks. Rather, the point is that, the same source of the nature philosophy of education should be from the ideas of man and woman of Nigerian extraction who contributed on a wide range of educational issues.

We are therefore challenged, as philosophers of education to venture into the search and selection of more Nigerian men of ideas in line with the principles of educational and philosophical thoughts. We need to bridges the gap between the areas that were not adequately explored by our native thinkers on the issues of philosopher's analysis, speculative and normative philosophy.

Ideas of pre-colonial scholars like Abdullahi Fodiyo, who made a lot of contributions in various fields of knowledge, should also be given desirable consideration. For instance most of the things Abdullahi Fodiyo propounded, without being apologetic to the western educationists, are in agreement with the present day educational ideas¹¹. A typical example is how Abdullahi Fodiyo criticizes those parents who do not care to send their children to school when they attain school age and on strong objection to present Almajiri menace in the northern Nigeria. He canvassed on various issues that are of relevance to the present day education system from education to control and management, curriculum structure and development, woman education, discipline in schools, teaching methods, as well as philosophy of education. The world make people to appreciate the value of philosophy of education because it is lack of this knowledge that led some philosophical ideas being seen as completely strange to our society and sometimes narrowly conceived as non-Islamic. On the other hand many sees these ideas not to be misunderstood as religiously based ideas whiles have no relevance to the sacrifice and computer age.

¹⁰. Akinpelu, J. A. (2005). *Essays in Philosophy and Education*, Ibadan-Stirling-Horden publishers, p. 195.

¹¹. Usman, M. & Arzika, M. K. (2015). Women Education and social Reformation: Abdullahi Fodiyo's Recipe, *Nigerian Journal of Educational Philosophy*, (NJEP). 26 (1): 36 – 40, ISSN: 0794-0114, October.

Conclusion

Thus, as no system of education is perfect and can be said not to require improvement, so are the ideas of any thinker. On many issues, educational thinkers have provided some of the argument that gave rise either to our perception or solution to some of the problems that we cannot offer better alternatives except we understand them. Three issues of educational equality, quality-quantity controversy and issues of relevance of education to national development were discussed. This exposes us to various solutions offered in the past to the problematic aspects of our system which enables us to have an intelligent understanding of the problems and thus the alternative solution. For instance how do we justifiably bridges the education imbalances between advantaged and disadvantaged states is it through free education at all level or through quota system suggest other alternative. How do we promote universal basic education, increase access to higher education without compromising the quality of our educational system? How do we make our education relevant to our national needs? Is the current science and non-science subject ratio on admission a solution? Is educational numeracy an adequate parameter in assessing our development? Do the emphases on science and technical education at the neglect of teacher education yields positive desired result of scientific in breakthrough Nigeria. It is our fervent believe that the reader may find this paper very interesting and thought provoking to justify the need in domesticating our educational thinkers to give proper direction to our educational system.

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