

FREE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: REALITY AND IMPLICATIONS

BY

AMAELE, S. (Ph .D)

Department of Educational Foundations,
University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria.

Abstract

A famous Greek philosopher, Socrates, once said that an unexamined life is not worth living. Great philosophers of education of all ages agreed that analysis of concepts, issues and statements is the hallmark of philosophy. This informs the author's interest in this very over-used and sometimes abused concept of "Free Education" in Nigeria. This paper sets out to critically examine the extent to which free education is practiced in Nigeria and its implications for the nation. It takes an analytic study of the concept of Free Education generally and relates it to the situation in Nigeria education and doubts if there has ever been free education in its complete sense in Nigeria.

Introduction

Education is a factory where human beings are refined and sent out into the labour market. An individual is not born blank as John Locke expressed. Rather he is born raw. This means that he is born with certain hidden talents. These talents are also called inborn potentialities. They are blunt not blank and require corresponding instruments to sharpen them. It is on the basis of the above, that great philosophers and educationists from the classical period have stressed the importance of education. Over these years and ages education has ranked as the best legacy any conscientious leader, government or parent could leave for her/his people. This is increasingly important because the quality of education given to a people determines the standard of growth achieved. This anchors the federal government's statement that education has been adopted as an instrument par excellence for effective national development (FRN 1981:5).

It is from this that the paper draws its relevance. In Nigeria, education is reduced to the concept of mass literacy and mass coping or even mass

certification. The reality of education, whose essence is intrinsic or the

Systematic development of the inner man has been betrayed. Some universities in Nigeria are glorified secondary schools. Most secondary schools are glorified primary schools. Then huts, under shady trees and some open places are still found to be centers of learning in some primary schools in the country. In some cases, rejected blocks or stones or even bare floors are competed for, among "handicapped" pupils as seats. Sitting on the windows to receive lectures becomes an advantage for some students as so many others are found standing in or around the lecture hall due to lack of spaces in the classroom in our tertiary institutions. The teacher becomes the lord in the class with the pupils and learners listening with little or no contributions. These things affect the quality and standard of the products of our education today.

Incidentally, Nigeria has constituted a task force to regulate the operations of the manufacturing industries and ensure that any drug, food, water, etc brought into, or produced in the country meet the required standard. It is necessary also to state clearly that what should be considered first in this country is that which will regulate, monitor and execute quality education.

Critical-minded Nigerians are worried about the system of education we have been operating for some decades now.

Meanwhile, a lot of policies and programmes are introduced into the Nigerian education system, sometimes in the name of "free and compulsory education". Observations have shown that some of such programmes have turned out to generate more problems than they seem to solve. The result therefore, is that quality or standard education has been replaced by mass literacy or mass certification, leading to the annual turn-over of unemployed graduates as against the production of human assets, required for societal growth and development.

This paper attempts to examine critically, the concept of free education and to ascertain the level of its reality in Nigeria. It will also discuss the implication of the above for Nigeria education.

Brief Conceptual Analysis of "Free Education"

The concept 'free' is so commonly used to the extent that its meaning is almost losing weight. Some people say that they are free when they are not actually free. Others say that they have set some others free whereas, the people are not still free. What precisely is this concept "free"? Perhaps a few statements may throw some light on the above.

"I am free"

"I am a free man now"

"She is free to go"

"He received a free book"

"The Church is organizing a free Seminar on poverty alleviation"

"You are free to talk today"

The first statement "I am free" is very open and could be more difficult to explain than the second "I am a free man now". For instance, "I am free" could be clarified by further reducing it into atomic sentences such as:

"I am a free man (now)"

"I am free to go"

"I am free to talk"

"I am free to go to school" and so on.

Cranston in (Schofield 1972 p. 257) argued that the statement "I am free" could be interpreted to mean that:

1. The individual is given the opportunity to indulge his desires, preference, etc without being debarred by authority.
2. A person masters a habitual weakness e.g. his habit of smoking. For many years, unable to break the habit, he reproached himself for being weak. However, when in the end he gives it up, he is free from his weakness.
3. One exchanges one bondage for another. A man completes the decoration of the entire interior and exterior of his house and feels released from bondage. But he is really only free to become "enslaved" by his garden, which has gone to ruin

while he was decorating.

The other statements listed above "She is free to go now". "He received a free book". "The Church is organizing a free seminar on poverty alleviation". "You are free to talk today", can be interpreted with one central word-removal of constraints. "He is free to now go" suggests that he had some constraints debarring his going, but now those constraints are removed. The constraints may be economical, political, social, physical, and spiritual and so on or even all of these. Those constraints are removed temporarily.

"He received a free book". This statement suggests that the book did not cost him anything. If the value of the book is two hundred naira and he had to pay one hundred and fifty naira (from home) to receive the book, it is no longer free. For the book to be free, it is either it was brought to him without him spending the transport fare or that the transport fare he paid was reimbursed to him. Again, if he had to spend one week for a book which values two hundred naira before he received it, it is assumed he suffered more constraints and so the book was no longer free. Again, if the book in question is not a thing of value to the recipient, then its freeness is lost.

"The church is organizing a free seminar on poverty alleviation". This statement could be true if every constraint is removed. This means that those attending the seminar will have free transport to and from the church. The seminar papers will be given to them free, they will be fed and accommodated free, and there will be no registration fees charged, and so on. If there is one single constraint, then the seminar is not free; except it is precisely put as registration-free seminar." In this case, the participants are well informed of the extent of freeness. In this circumstance, the constraint is only removed on the registration. It is an unnecessary repetition of words to say that a seminar is "free" and then go on stating - free transport, free lunch, free accommodation and so on, except you are limiting the constraints. In this case it is no longer "free" in its general term.

"Free Education".

From the analysis above, it is clear that the issue or concept of free education is a complex one. The single concept 'education' itself is so complex that it has no universally accepted definition. Nwagwu (1976)

Strengthen this assumption by arguing that education does not lend itself easily to definitions since it changes with people, place and time. The above statement is in line with Mill's positioning that education embraces not only the deliberate processes of schooling, but it includes even indirect and incident influence. (Mill 1967)?

Education cannot mean something different because of the attachment of the objective "free". Good society begets good *life* and good society is product of education. It is not everything that passes for education that is really education. This is why Olatunji (1995) argued that there is a wide difference between schooling and education. Nwagwu (1976:14-15) therefore, advised that "education must not be partial, rationed, selfishly enjoyed or used merely to perpetuate the status quo"

From the above, it is obvious to state that "free education" entails so many things. In other words, free education means the removal of every constraint to sound and quality education. *Free* education means the establishment of various kind of schools and expansion of school curriculum to take each child develop according to his or her ability, age, interest and so on. It means the establishment and provision of library facilities, technical and vocational equipment, recruitment and retention of qualified and adequate manpower. It means tuition free; free feeding, free books; free accommodation, free transportation, free Uniform and other personal Uses of the learner. Free education also means the removal of every socio-cultural impediment to the child's education. The sum total of all these, makes education free. The partial implementation of the above can never qualify the system as free because the presence of *any one* of the above constitutes constraint to the child's access to education.

Global Position on Free Education

This agitation for free (Universal) education has been on for long in various parts of the world. One of the criticisms against the Sophists by Socrates and others like Plato among others was that they were teaching for money. Socrates and the Likes of *Plato* and Aristotle maintain that education should be state sponsored.

In 1948, the United Nations Organization, in its Universal Declaration of Human Rights states in article 26 that:

1. Everyone has the right to education. This right shall be free at least in the elementary and primary stages
2. Elementary education shall be compulsory, with technical and professional education shall be made generally available.
3. Higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
4. Parents shall have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children (Nwagwu 1976:4).

The global objective clearly states the fact that education is a right and privilege of the child. In fact, education is more than mere right but a fundamental Human right, which should be obeyed by all nations.

Nwagwu (1976:4) affirmed this fact, arguing that: "the right to education is a basic right necessary for the achievement of all other freedoms". The above assertion will be supported with a statement credited to a former president of America, Thomas Jefferson who stated that "a nation, which expects to be ignorant and free and civilized, expects what never was and never will be".

A people cannot be free from ignorance without education. Consequently, the masses cannot benefit from education where there are constraints to their access to it. In other words, good society targets good life, and good society is a product of education. The *first* and second world wars (1914-1918) and (1939-1945) respectively, as well as the Soviet revolution of 1917 create global panic and insecurity. The demand for global peace and security resulted to the

declaration of human rights. The right to education the overriding rights to all the spheres of Humanity.

The implication of the provisions of article 26 as stated that the Provision of quality and quantity education. Quality education could be explained in terms of the standard of teaching and learning, human and material "resources, adequacy and valuability of the education to the individual and the immediate and wider society. Quantity education refers to accessibility to all on the grounds of age, needs, ability and soon. Another implication is that all constraint to free education at least (then) to elementary and primary

Stages should be removed. In other words, this level of education is universal.

Another important implication worth mentioning is the right to choose the kind of education considered to be "good" for a child. This means that the system of education should be varied, comprehensive and democratic so that the parents could choose what is best for their children. If this constraint is not removed then the purpose of the declaration or article is defeated.

Prior to this golden call, some erudite scholars and educational philosophers like J.S. Mill, Alfred Marshall, Karl Marx, among others had argued that state investment on education is the most valuable of all capital input in human beings. Likewise, a Nigerian political genius and educationalist, the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo, opined that if Nigerians want to modernize and live in peace, free education at all levels must be provided for all the citizens (Awolowo 1968). This was strongly supported by Fawehinmi (1974) who maintained that free education at all levels in Nigeria would save the country from slow, lopsided economic development and other socioeconomic ills that plague an illiterate society.

Free Education in Nigeria: Reality and implications.

Education is a transparent phenomenon. It is an investment on human beings. The investment and characteristics of education given by the society can easily be assessed by the quality of production. The input is assessed by the output. The popular assumption in Nigeria today is that there is free and compulsory education, at least up to the junior secondary level. The above assumption was built on the launching of 'the Universal Basic Education on the 30th September, 1999 by the incumbent President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo. The commencement date of the programme was January 2000. The declaration, which took place at Shehu Kangiwa Stadium Sokoto, stated that the scheme aims to:

1. Develop in the entire citizenry a strong consciousness for education and strong commitment to its vigorous promotion.

2. Provide free, compulsory universal basic education for every Nigerian child of school going age.
3. Reduce drastically dropout rate from the formal school system through improved relevance and efficiency.
4. Cater for drop-outs and out-of-school children! Approaches to the provision and promotion of basic education.
5. Ensure the acquisition of appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative and life skills (as well as the ethical, moral and civic values) needed for laying the foundation for life long learning.

The ambiguous nature of the above objectives, represent the true Nigerian attitude to education. The ambiguity, which is always identified in Nigerian education, is deliberately fashioned to make for escape whenever the target is not reached. It is not the intention of this paper to make a critique of the above objectives. But it is necessary to state that there is no significant difference between it and what we have had since 1976. The issue is not on the objectives but its practical relevance. This anchors the relevance of Coombs argument which states:

That what seem the issues of the day is the re-examination of organized process by which a society pursues education, and whether that process and its results can be made more relevant, meaningful, efficient and effective within the context of the particular society and its development task. (Coombs 1968 p.9).

Setting up flamboyant objectives without realizing them is a mere day dream. The essence of any programme is its workability and of course, education is about functionality. Elboim-dror (1970) identified three main subsystems of education, which are policy formulations, management and implementation. He argued that there is a wide gap between the policy formation and implementation, the former sets the standard and criteria for evaluating the accomplishments of the organization. This is the subsystem where free education can be located in Nigeria. It belongs to the class of formation.

The concept of free education re-echoes in almost every education related document in Nigeria. For instance, the National policy on education which was

first launched in 1977 states clearly that: "in pursuance of the above objectives (that is the objective of primary education), Government has made primary education free and universal by implementing the UPE Scheme in September, 1976..." (FRN 1981: 1).

Section 18 (3) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria states:

Government shall strive to eradicate illiteracy, and to this end government shall and when practicable provide:

- (a) Free, compulsory and universal primary education.
- (b) Free secondary education
- (c) Free adult literacy programme.

The indication or implication of all these is that there is the national assumption that education should be made free at least to the primary level in Nigeria. But is education "free"? To what extent is education free in Nigeria? The foundation statement above places the ultimate value on literacy. "Government shall strive to eradicate illiteracy". This is the basis for which the government is providing "free education" from the constitutional point of view. The above clear deficiency explains why our education, from the colonial time to the present, is mostly concerned with reading and writing. This, in turn, produces a lot of white collar job seekers. No doubt Nwagwu's caution was timely as he argued that education must not be partial, rationed, selfishly enjoyed or used merely to perpetuate the status quo.

The nation has had some shades of free education from 1955 when the Action Group Government in the then Western Region, led by the Late Chief Obafemi Awolowo declared Universal (free) Primary Education in the region. The government then was committed in words and action to making education accessible to most pupils of school age. Although, it was not very successful, it reached an appreciable extent in the bid to generate universal awareness and access to education within the region. For instance, pupil enrolment in schools in the region in 1954 was 457,000. But when the UPE was launched in 1955 the enrolment rose to 811,000. Similarly the number of teachers increased within the Period from 17,000 to 27,000. The Banjo Commission set up by the government

to look into the prevailing problems associated with the programme identified the following inadequacies among others:

1. Large number of untrained teachers.
2. Lack of continuity in staffing.
3. Too much attention to the private studies to the neglect of the children.
4. Too many large classes.
5. Presence of under-age children.
6. Poor syllabus.
- 7., Lack of co-operation by parents and guardians.
8. Inadequate inspection of schools. (Osokoya 1989:78-79)

These inadequacies crippled that golden ambition. The effort made by the Eastern Nigerian Government in 1957 was equally commendable, even though it collapsed almost the same year. The re-introduction of school fees in the region in 1958 led to the withdrawal of about 260,000 pupils. The programme failed as a result of similar inadequacies identified earlier in the Western Region. These inadequacies adversely affected the quality and standard of education.

The 1976 National UPE scheme was planned in 1974. It estimated a teacher/pupils ratio of 1:35. An additional estimate of 60,000 teachers was made. While the government estimate of teachers fell below the target that of pupils' enrolment increased tremendously. The number of teachers and pupils in Nigeria in that year (1976) was 194,000 and about 8.2 million respectively (Amaele 2001: 146). Infact, out of the 194,000 teachers Nwabachili (2000) recorded that 70% were either untrained or trained but uncertified. The above and other inadequacies identified, affected the standard and quality of our education.

The Universal Basic Education has come. Two years after its proclamation, Nigerians are waiting to see it transform from paper (policy) level to the managerial and implementation levels. The highest observable change is that there is free tuition fees in most primary schools in Nigeria. This effort is commendable. However, these measures are not enough to say that education is free in Nigeria.

Going back to the conceptual analysis of "free" discussed earlier, it will be

noted that free education does not mean reduction of quality at the expense of quantity. It does not also imply the removal of some constraints, but the removal of all constraints to the child's access to both quality and quantity education.

Implications of Free Education on Nigerian education by implication here, the author is referring to the ideal features and actions that could be observed and taken, if education in Nigeria could be adjudged as being "free". This serves the dual purpose of recommendations. Consequently, free education in Nigeria, at any given level has the following implications:

1. There should be definite, realizable and well intended, anticipated and directed specific objectives of education.
2. The curriculum should not only be useful to the learner and the society, but should also be varied and comprehensive for all the pupils to choose according to their abilities, needs, ages, etc.
3. The education should have appreciable standard and value.
4. Various agencies of learning: the home, religious organizations, mass media, etc. should be involved and encouraged to participate in educating the pupils.
5. There should not be any disruption of school work by the teachers, the government, parents, pupils, etc for any unjust cause rather than holidays.
6. There should be no embargo on the training, recruitment and retention of highly qualified teachers.
7. Free and compulsory education should be backed up by law and sanctions pronounced on any defaulter. ,
8. At least 25% of the annual budget should judiciously be allocated, disbursed and spent on education.
9. Only professional teachers should be allowed to make policies, manage and implement our education system.
10. School fees and other forms of levies are completely eradicated.
11. Boarding school system should be re-introduce; with adequate facilities and supervision.
12. Library, Laboratory, Technical and Vocational facilities and equipment should

be adequately and promptly provided. .

13. Adequate manpower should be made available to schools. The teacher/pupil ratio of 1:35 can be managed in our primary and secondary schools.
14. All forms of examination malpractice, cut activities and other immoral acts in our schools should be properly checked and culprits summarily dealt with.
15. School uniforms and other learning materials should be provided free to the pupils.
16. Teaching should be recognized and treated as a profession and teachers as professionals.
17. Remedial provision should be made for pupils who have some inadequacies in feeding or other personal (socio-cultural) constraints to receiving education.
18. Schools for the handicapped should be given much more attention. Facilities should be adequately and regularly provided (to them) for effective learning.
19. Politicization of education should be outlawed. In this case, only the experts who are placed in the helm of affairs in our institution of learning should be allowed to take decisions on educational matters.

Conclusion

Nigeria as a nation has not practiced "free education" since the history of Western education started in 1842. Rather, at one time or the other, programmes have been introduced which abolished the payment of school fees, in part or in full at one particular level or the other. The removal of school fees or other related levies does not make education free because there are still other constraints to the child's access to education. Some of such constraints have already been addressed. When obstacles to acquiring quality and standard education are removed, granting access to every child to receive education according to age, gender, interest, ability then we say that there is free education. Tuition- free education, scholarship awards to students and establishment of more schools, are parts to free education, but not free education. Free education does not operate in parts but in full.

Besides, experience has shown that each time these are introduced; they are not even handled well. It is either there is shortage of teachers, or teachers are not paid or quality is reduced. For the nation to actualize the dream of free education in its complete sense the items recommended above should be implemented.

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