DOES NIGERIA HAVE A PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION WORTHY OF THE NAME?

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Commentary

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The possibility of Nigeria having what could be called a philosophy of education at present has been put to question. While some argue that the present educational system would not have emerged without a particular philosophy underpinning it, even if this philosophy is weak, some others contend that the way education has been run in this nation goads one to cast doubts on the existence of such a philosophy. This paper contends that the debate should not be centered on whether Nigeria has a philosophy of education or not, but on the level of philosophical veracity of the already existing educational philosophy. It thus concludes that while it could be said that Nigeria possesses an eclectic educational philosophy, which is the right philosophy needed for every nation with cultural multiplicity and diversity such as Nigeria, this philosophy however will be made better if it is structured to give room for consistencies and comprehensiveness in its blend of inputs from various genres of philosophies so that it becomes possible for the emerged brand of eclectic philosophy to generate coherencies and a direction in Nigeria's policy cum system of education.

Key words: Philosophy of education, system of education, policy on education, eclecticism, democracy and egalitarianism.

INTRODUCTION

The above question appears trivial, and sometimes taken for granted, but it is indeed a matter of concern for scholars interested in the actual development of education in this part of the world. There are those of us who believe Nigeria has what could be called a philosophy of education, although weak, while there are critics who profess otherwise. Those who have challenged the existence of a Nigerian educational philosophy could be conveniently grouped into four, albeit with some notable convergences in the broad grouping. These groups of scholars outrightly deny the possibility of the country possessing what could be called a real philosophy of education at the moment. The reasons for the denial are multi-faceted.

The first critic recognizes the usual relationship which ought to exist between an educational philosophy and a nation’s educational policy/system. This recognition makes him expect that the philosophy guiding the Nigeria’s educational system ought to be explicitly stated in a conspicuous section of the policy on education. Disappointingly, nowhere in the policy is it stated what the philosophy guiding the educational system is. (There are allusions, for instance, to the philosophy adopted in the policy, but nowhere is the exact philosophy stated). To make the criticism clearer – the overall philosophy of Nigeria; the five national goals of Nigeria; the national educational goals; the values to be inculcated and the various measures for implementation - are all clearly stated in the first section of the policy; but in reference to the philosophy, what we have are elusive statements such as: “In Nigeria's philosophy of education, we believe that…”(FRN 2004); “Nigeria's philosophy of education therefore is based on the development of the individual into a sound and effective citizen; the full integration of the individual into the community; and the provision of equal access to educational opportunities for all citizens…”(FRN 2004); “For this philosophy to be in harmony with Nigeria’s goals, education has to be geared towards self realization, better human relationship…”(FRN 2004), and so on. And so, the critic
begins to wonder where and what exactly is that philosophy which is alluded to by the above kind of statements. Not finding a direct answer to his question, the critic immediately concludes that we “cannot boast of a philosophy of education. What we parade today as Nigerian philosophy of education is mere educational policy” (Fayemi 2008).

The second type of critic denies the possibility of Nigeria having a philosophy of education premised on the fact that the country at present does not have a social ideology. Evidently, the ideology imbibed by a nation is the foundation for the kind of educational philosophy and the consequential educational system that appears on board. The philosophy of education is often structured in a way that allows for the realization of the set ideology. If there is a disconnect, then such philosophy would not deserve the name in the first instance. This is what Dewey means when he stresses that education is a social function, and that until we know what sort of society is best desirable, we do not know what sort of education is best (Garrison 1999). The function of education, basically, is to help in the achievement or realization of ideology agreed upon by men in the society. This connotes that without such ideology, education would have no use in the first place. For education and its philosophy to justify their existence and purpose, they need to be aligned with the societal ideology. The logic thus becomes clear - no social ideology, no philosophy of education, and no meaningful system of education. This logic explains the position of the second critic. He believes that if Nigeria as a nation does not yet have a social ideology, how then can anybody mute the idea of a philosophy of education? In Fadahunsi’s opinion; “It is worrisome to note that Nigeria, despite her forty-eight years of national history, has not concretely spelled out her philosophy of education. All there is as of today, is the National Policy on Education which is just a volume show-casing government’s way of achieving parts of our national objectives through education. The absence of a Nigerian philosophy of education is not a product of dearth of philosophers of education in the country. Rather, it is a function of lacuna of national ideology. Nigeria, unlike America and other developed nations of the world, has no precise and articulate ideology of her own” (Fadahunsi 2008). He goes further; “Not until Nigeria fashioned for herself a stable and sound ideology, which other sectors of the national life will be patterned after, the future probability of sustainable educational development in Nigeria may be dwindled” (Fadahunsi 2008).

There is yet another critic. This critic professes that Nigeria indeed, has a social ideology which is reflected on page one of the fourth edition of the National Policy on Education. The point of total departure from the last critic, however, is that the ideology put in actual practice by Nigerian leaders is radically different from that which is stated in theory in the policy. Put differently, “what we want to be” finds contradiction in “what we are presently”. This means that the ideology we imbibe at present differs from the ideology we aspire to imbibe. This situation creates confusion in the mindset of the critic. This seeming confusion precipitates the impossibility of having a workable philosophy of education in Nigeria. Nduka, for instance, makes his position clear with the following words; “As far as I am concerned, what now passes as a philosophy for Nigerian education is a non-starter in the philosophical stakes. At best, it is a mythology of aims, goals and objectives lacking clarity, coherence and consistency. The basic problem arises from the fact that as a philosophy of education for a particular society, it does not address itself squarely to the basic question: what type of society are we setting ourselves to build? Is it a semi-religious oligarchy or a secular state, tradition-bound or scientifically oriented, capitalist or socialist, just or unjust, elitist or egalitarian, and so on? The lack of clarity and coherence over such basic issues leads predictably to inconsistencies in thought and practice” (Nduka 2006).

The above submission might seem to portray Nduka’s ignorance of the stated ideology Nigeria wishes to imbibe, as contained in the policy; but indeed, Nduka is in no way ignorant of such ideology; his criticism is that the ideology put in theory contrasts entirely the ideology set in practice. He says; “...The point I am making is that we are in this country busy running an elitist, inegalitarian and unjust socioeconomic system. It is a system which acquiesces in the exploitation of the mass of the people by a small class of the so-called commercial and industrial elite, the managers and the bureaucratic elite whether in the civil service, the army or the universities. It is a system which permits the appropriation as well as misappropriation of a disproportionate amount of the nation’s wealth by a favoured but numerically small class, who are thereby enabled to live in comfort, and even luxury while the rest of the people wallow in comparative poverty and outright misery. This socio-economic system has never lacked ideological support. Incolonal times, it was defended in the name sometimes of free trade (including of course, the slave trade), sometimes of monopoly capital and private property, at other times, in terms of the civilization and development of backward people. Colonial people and their defenders denounced the system as imperialism. The socioeconomic system we are referring to is, to call it its proper name, capitalism” (Nduka 2006).

And that, of course, according to Nduka, is “the very antithesis of building a just and egalitarian society”. He
thus concludes that; “... We must make up our mind whether we wish our country to be a capitalist or socialist state, a semi-religious oligarchy or a secular state, tradition-bound or scientifically oriented, just or unjust, democratic or despotic, elitist or egalitarian" (Nduka 2006).

Until this is done, we may never be able to achieve a consistent and coherent philosophy of education worthy of the name. Nduka’s criticism incidentally, lends support to Akinpelu’s submission. In Akinpelu’s opinion; “Nigeria, like many other African nations, is still groping towards a statement of what type of society she wants. Never mind the five national objectives enunciated at the beginning of the 4-year development plan. It is in the nature of such plans to be preceded by high sounding statements of objectives, the sincerity of which is immediately betrayed as soon as the pages containing the allocation of money are opened. The current 4-year plan is no exception” (Akinpelu 2005).

Akinpelu makes reference to Aluko, who in referring to the national policy, points out that “the planners could not in one breath speak of aiming at an egalitarian society and in the same breath condemn half or three-quarters of the nation’s children to a life of ignorance, poverty and illiteracy, through a denial of universal primary education" He sums up his position thus; “All we have been saying so far is that Nigeria cannot yet boast of a blueprint of the society which it holds as the ideal. And yet, this task of defining an ideal society is essential if we are to get a clear statement of the objectives which our education must pursue” (Akinpelu 2005).

Again, there is a fourth-type of critic. He bases his judgement on the fact that the National Policy on Education is not based on a clear-cut philosophy, but on eclecticism. The policy is eclectic in the sense that it is not rigidly committed to a particular philosophical outlook. It borrows variously from different schools of thought such as idealism, realism, existentialism, pragmatism, among others. Amaele sounds forceful with his opinion that Nigeria is yet to have a philosophy for education given the eclectic nature of the policy. According to him; “Presently, multifarious philosophies influence and inform the so-called Nigerian philosophy of education. These philosophies have foreign foundations and could be described as a hybrid of Euro-American thinking about reality, knowledge and values. Without doubt, this eclectic nature of the philosophy of Nigerian education cannot but generate contradictions, illusions and frustration for teachers and students alike” (Amaele 2005).

Amaele seems convinced that the eclectic nature of our philosophy is the reason for the inconsistencies and incoherencies witnessed in Nigerian education system; and since it is not in the character of a sound philosophy to generate contradictions, then, it is logical to say Nigeria does not yet have a philosophy of education. Perhaps, Amaele is a disciple of Paul Hirst who had been an unrepentant champion of clear-cut philosophies. In one of his articles, he had asked if it was not obvious that; “If people differ about the nature of ultimate reality, they must differ in judging what is important in the school curriculum? Must not a religious person think religious education absolutely essential and an atheist think it thoroughly undesirable? Must not a Western liberal democrat, because he holds different ethical doctrines, necessarily disagree with a communist on at least some issues in moral education? And must it not therefore be true that philosophical beliefs do determine clear educational principles which must be put into practice if obvious inconsistencies are to be avoided?” (Hirst 1963).

In the opinion of Lucas, supporters of eclecticism are those who find themselves unable to give their allegiance to any single school of thought, hence, they pick and choose bits and pieces from one position, now from another. He affirms that such dispositions towards eclecticism cannot help but be superficial; inevitably, it does serious damage to whatever cohesive unity and internal logic a position may possess (FRN 2004). The submission of our fourth-type of critic, then, is that the National Policy on Education would have to be patterned after one philosophy, say idealism, realism or existentialism before we could conveniently assert that Nigeria indeed has a philosophy of education. Let us, at this juncture, evaluate the positions of the critics. To the first critic who does not think Nigeria has a philosophy of education on the basis that such is not neatly written-out in the policy adopted for the system: This position appears too simplistic and elementary. It simply berates the level of sophistication which a policy of this nature should be identified with. Put differently, to expect that the philosophy underlying the policy of education should have been bogously written out as..., is to presume that such document was designed for some children in some kindergartens, due to their level of maturity and simplicity. If, for instance, I meet a man who does not believe in pre-determined and fixed aims of life, but opine that they are in the making through a process of change. If I later find out that my man preaches that power or capacity of a human being is valuable and important which enables him to adjust to the environment or which makes him able to change his environment according to his needs and requirements; and again, the man’s view about realities, especially education, is that they are only useful and purposeful if they contribute to human welfare and progress or perhaps, if they are...
instrumental and experimental, would I need by these facts, to be told by a soothsayer or a special announcement by the man himself that he is a pragmatist, or that he belongs to Dewey's camp of pragmatism?. His life and thought-pattern should of course, portray or betray him as such. One may even wonder if any thorough-going philosopher down the ages, tried announcing himself as such before peoples' discovery of his/her inclinations. Socrates, for instance, was just going about the city of Athens, acting like an 'intellectual-midwife' to his fellow compatriots. Little did he start, before people detected the philosophical dexterity in him. The policy on education could not have been written in that elementary form proposed by our critic. If the critic cares much about the philosophical content of the policy, then, he may wish to go through the national goals of Nigeria; the several objectives of education; the submissions and assumptions of the policy makers; the basis of the policy; the direction of the policy; the values expected for inculcation as stated in the policy; the purpose of education at all tiers of the education system; and the various measures for the implementation of the policy – all are contained in the document. These parameters are the channels through which one could discover the kind of philosophy underlying the policy on education in Nigeria. To the second critic who says Nigeria has no philosophy of education because she does not have a social ideology yet. The critic's logic is fascinating: no ideology, no philosophy of education and no meaningful education. It is a logical position that is neither debatable nor contestable by anybody who knows his/her worth in the realm of education. However, the critic's denial of an accepted social ideology provokes a surprise; a surprise at the level of unawareness of the ideology Nigeria wishes to adopt. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the National Development Plans and the National Policy on Education leave no one in doubt on the choice of social ideology which Nigeria wishes to adopt. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the National Development Plans and the National Policy on Education leave no one in doubt on the choice of social ideology which Nigeria wishes to adopt. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria states that Nigeria is a democratic and egalitarian nation (Nduka 2006). This commitment is re-echoed in other policies in other facets of Nigeria's life (for example, economics, politics, and so on). Where then does the opinion that Nigeria has no social ideology emanate from?. This was an opinion orchestrated in the 70s and 80s when the early editions of the policy were not clear enough on the choice of a social ideology. With other revisions, and especially, the fourth edition of the policy, a denial of an ideology in Nigeria would only be tantamount to a re-packaging of an outdated opinion that enjoys no current evidential back-up. The third type of critic is fully aware that Nigeria aims at achieving a democratic and egalitarian society. The problem, for him however, is that what Nigeria imbibes in actual practice is entirely different from what she professes. That is, the ideology set in place in Nigeria is contradistinctory to democracy and egalitarianism which Nigeria holds in theory. This situation, thus, reflects an indecision on what choice of ideology she wishes to adopt. In the light of this seeming indecision, it would be wrong for Nigeria to boast of a workable philosophy of education. This is the opinion expressed by Nduka, Akinpelu, Akuko and others. Nduka tries to remind us that Nigeria, through the colonial experiences, has turned out to be a capitalist and elitist society, trying in so many ways to live up to Western capitalist structure, and that right from the colonial period until this very day, Nigerian development has been proceeding along a capitalist- elitist path, rather than egalitarian. He buttresses his point by quoting Udoji commission's observation that "the entire educational system of the nation seems to be designed to uphold and reinforce the elitist philosophy" (Nduka 2006). It was thus evident, in Nduka's opinion, that "the experts who drew up the second and third national development plans were ignorant of the development strategy they were adopting" (Nduka 2006). One thing is certainly obvious in the critic's position: it is that capitalism/elitism is the ideology presently practiced in Nigeria, but that this ideology is bad and anti-developmental, given the numerous instances and examples enunciated in his position. He is willing to accept that there is no other ideological alternative better than the adoption of an egalitarian model of development; what he is left to understand is how to match Nigerian profession of egalitarianism with practical commitments. Perhaps what the critic needs to first realize is that the practice of capitalism/elitism instead of egalitarianism is not a product of confusion on the ideology wished for. It is just a reflection of the desire to do something, but lack of will-power to effect the desire. Put differently, Nigeria does not appear confused on what ideology she wants to adopt; she only finds herself incapacitated on the modalities for effecting her desire. If the critic is willing to accept this proposition, then, we may help him by reframing what his trouble should have been in the first instance. The quagmire should have been: - how can we achieve a democratic and an egalitarian society given the present capitalist circumstances?; What kind of structures are needed to help install egalitarianism? - What planning and implementation strategies need be effected to herald democracy and egalitarianism in Nigeria? Is the philosophy of education, underlying the present policy on education, capable of generating a democratic and egalitarian society? The answers to these questions will definitely shift our attention from the critics' earlier question: - does Nigeria possess a philosophy of education? But then, before re-directing our critics' attention, there is yet another critic that has not been responded to. This
critic argues that any system of education founded on eclecticism is devoid of a 'real' philosophy of education. In his view, it is systematic and concise to have a policy patterned on a single philosophy like idealism, realism, existentialism, and so on. But to have an assemblage of two, three or more of these philosophies inextricably degenerates into confusion, inconsistencies and incoherencies. It is this approach that has led to the mismatches that are currently experienced in our educational system. To arise from these problems, for the critic, Nigeria would now have to choose one philosophy of education. To respond to this pattern of thought, one only needs to say that the adoption of one single philosophy as the base of Nigerian education is unrealistic, superficial and even fallacious. The understanding here is that it is very difficult, if not impracticable, to locate any standard system of education which corresponds one-to-one with just a philosophical school. Nations that have purportedly adopted one school or the other as the basis for their policies, have resorted at one time or the other, in picking certain elements which are complementary from other philosophies, to their chosen school of thought. The thought of being purely a realist, or an idealist, or so, is even practically unrealistic. The records of professional philosophers stand to confirm this; they have had to dangle around two to three complementary schools of thought in their perceptions of issues. Those who have stubbornly stuck to a school of thought have been found to be grossly inconsistent on the long run. Thus, what a clear-cut philosophy achieves in being simple, concise and systematic, it "loses in being truncated and unrealistic" (Akinpelu 2005). More than being really superficial, it becomes a fallacy from a strict logical angle, to ever think that there could be a direct deduction of an educational system cum policy, from just a single philosophical school of thought. This is why Akinpelu submits that "a genuine system of education is essentially eclectic embracing the doctrines of two or more of these schools of thought" (Akinpelu 2005). But we may quickly warn here that the choice of eclecticism in two or more schools of thought, without proper considerations for complementarism, portends the capability of generating inconsistencies and incoherencies. This is to say that whenever schools of thought are bounded together without bothering on how similar or related such schools are, the resultant effect might be devastating. In as much as it takes eclecticism to produce a realistic, authentic, viable and workable educational policy, such eclecticism must be based on a choice of complementary schools of thought. It then becomes easy for this choice to engender clarity, consistency, and more importantly, coherence among the objectives set up in a policy and the strategies adopted for immediate implementation. The attempt to base an entire nation's educational system on just one brand of philosophy is an impossible and impracticable task. Such attempt, as argued by Taneja, will even undermine the several positions, perceptions and contributions of 'others' who do not belong to the chosen school of thought (Taneja 2001); and in our peculiar case, such attempt will be anti-democratic (against our chosen social ideology). Perhaps the fourth critic just like other critics, need not query if the Nigerian educational system has an educational philosophy underlying it; at best, the question which the fourth critic could meaningfully ask is:

- How comprehensive is the eclectic brand of philosophy adopted in the NPE?
- Put differently, does Nigeria's choice of eclecticism in the system of education give room for compatibilities?

If our last critic agrees to confine himself to this type of question, then, one begins to see some similarities with the third critic's question. All the questions then boil down to consistence, coherence and compatibility. This means that we should be interested in raising and answering questions on what level of relationship exists between Nigeria's social ideology and her educational system. In this wise, one would be interested in finding out the kind of role philosophy has played in the relationship between our ideology and our educational system. Consequently, the pressing issue will be the determination of the quality of the philosophical component of the Nigerian educational enterprise. The compelling question, then, is:

- How philosophical is Nigerian philosophy of education?

The above question necessarily implies one thing: that Nigeria indeed has a philosophy underlying her system of education. The question only raises instigation on how rigorous, consistent, coherent and comprehensive the said philosophy of education is. As such, we can conveniently replace the adjective – philosophical with any of the above criteria in our question. In any case, no matter how the question is recast, the concern remains the same, and that is, investigating the level of philosophy infused into the educational policy. To discover this, we will first of all need to find out the nature and level of relationship that presently exists among all the units involved in the nation's educational system. The units been referred to are: Nigeria's social ideology; educational philosophy and educational policy/system. The relationship among these units will automatically be an answer to our question.Cursorily, reflectionson the policy/system of education reveal an eclectic philosophical approach. However, there is something terribly lacking in our peculiar brand of eclecticism. What appears missing is the ability to perfectly blend the various inputs into what makes up the present Nigerian philosophy of education. This implies that the mélange of schools of thought featured in the policy document were nipped together without much care for consistence, coherence and compatibility, and this thus, presents us with no particular direction. Various scholars (Osokoya
2002 and 2008; Amaele2005; Adenokun 2006; and so on) have opined that Nigeria’s policy on education suggests a pragmatic approach; an existential approach; an idealistic approach; a realistic approach, and some other approaches. But they were quick to add that the fundamental principles of these approaches are not practiced anywhere in our public school system. No wonder Freeman-Butts had characterized the whole scenario as ‘educational disjunctivitis’ with a considerable degree of discontinuity jarring inconsistencies and disharmony (Butts 1969). Indeed, it is a cut-and-paste display (to borrow from computer jargons). The mismatches experienced in Nigeria’s educational system are precipitated by an educational philosophy that has no much room for complements. If, however, there is a perfect knitting of the various inputs, with much care for consistence, coherence and compatibility, the adopted philosophy would be a golden instrument for the achievement of Nigeria’s social ideology. The level of uncoordination witnessed in the chosen philosophy informs the disconnections emanating in the policy formulation, and consequently, in the practice of education in Nigeria, and until something is done to eradicate the mismatches, we will continue to give room for scholars’ doubt on the existence of a Nigerian educational philosophy.

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