Diversity, Inclusion and Equity: Making a Case for the Underserved and Vulnerable in the Nigerian Society

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Abstract
Education is the lifeline of the growth and development of a nation. For a nation to achieve exponential growth, its educational sector must be given high priority. In Nigeria, not much priority has been given to formal education in recent decades. Budgetary allocations to education sector over the years has been poor; only 7.2% of the NGN17 trillion budget for 2022 was allocated to education. Although a slight increase to the 5.7 % of the previous year, it is far below the internationally recommended benchmark of 15-20%. Educational provisions for persons with disabilities, the girl child, and the adults are recognised more in principle than in practice. Anecdotal evidence has shown that while there are laws and policies in place to guarantee education for such group of persons, the implementation of these laws and policies have fallen short of expectations. Another challenge of inequality and discrimination is not altogether unconnected to the different perception of education and literacy by the different cultures and ethnic groups. Culture is a way of life of the people; systems and beliefs in particular cultures can affect how education particularly formal education or literacy is

accepted. Pedagogical approaches can influence how well learners of this particular groups or the vulnerable can be accommodated and integrated into the learning environment. Though there are many literatures on discrimination of the right of certain categories of persons to education, not many exist on tackling the problem from pedagogical approaches and the place of the library. This article discusses diversity of learners, it identifies the challenges of inequality and discrimination against certain persons in their right to education, and then highlights the possible solution in pedagogical approaches and utilisation of library that could be adopted to allow for inclusion and equity.

Keywords: Education, Discrimination, Equity, Pedagogical approaches, Nigeria, Libraries

Introduction

Education is one of the fundamental rights recognised under the various international, regional and national human rights laws, legislations and treaties; as well as in national constitutions. A common trait to all the United Nations treaties and conventions on human rights is the right to education. A right that encapsulates the principle of equality of opportunity and freedom from discrimination in education. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 (UNDHR) International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights 1966 (ICCPR), the International Covenants on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1966 (ICESCR), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (CRC), are international treatises that guarantee education as a fundamental right. Several initiatives like the United Nations (UN) initiative of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) all have education as a major goal to be achieved. Nigeria by its 1999 Constitution (as amended) guarantees its citizens' right to education. Education is the lifeline of the growth and development of a nation.

For a nation to achieve exponential growth, its educational sector must be given high priority. There are diverse learners and because of the peculiarities of such learners in gender, physical ability, learning capability, environment, etc. that put some in the minority, there are challenges that put these set in the marginalised or discriminated. Article 17 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) guarantees the right to education for every individual. Article 18 (3) & (4) of ACHPR guarantees the protection of the rights of women and children, ensuring women are not discriminated against; it guarantees the rights to special measure of protection for the disabled and the aged according to their special needs. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006 affirms the rights of persons with disabilities including their right to education. The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of

Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly defined discrimination against women as any distinction, exclusion, or restriction made on the basis of gender which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field. Discrimination or inequality can emanate from an individual, group or a particular gender not having fundamental freedom, equal access to opportunities in political and public life as well as opportunities in education and employment (Ezekwe & Uchechukwu, 2019).

Nigeria in the quest to align the nation's objectives of having sound and effective citizens who are fully integrated into the community being able to compete globally, and especially to align the objective with the global objectives on education recognised by the United Nations, in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the global initiative of Education for All (EFA), not disregarding the national mission on the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) launched several educational policies and programmes. Despite many of these lofty educational policies, there are several challenges faced in the educational sector that causes quite a number of school-age children to be out of school and the prevalence of mass illiteracy in Nigeria. Anecdotal evidences have identified such challenges as including lack of proper implementation of educational policies and programmes, specifically lack of adequate funding, lack of necessary infrastructures, lack of or inadequate personnel (teachers and tutors), lack of trained personnel (for specific or special areas), lack of awareness of such policies and programmes, some cultural and religious practices that mitigate against having formal education.

Studies show that there exists correlational or direct relationship between formal education, employment and socio-economic effect (Ezekwe & Uchechukwu, 2019). In the study carried out on the correlation of educational diversity and employees' innovativeness, it was found that for employees with higher education or educational certification, they tend to have higher chances of employment and higher wages than those with lesser education (Nkiru, Adeleke, Akintimehin, and Nwamaka, 2019). It can be deduced from the study by Tinuola (2011) that the level of a person's education contributes to his imagination, creativity and contributions to the workforce.

This in turn translates to bigger and better innovations and contributions in the larger society and in effect the nation.

Some categories whom are labelled as special groups are often marginalised in the quest for education and information availability, information seeking and information accessibility. These set of persons have been recognised to include the blind/visually impaired, the deaf and/or dumb, the hospitalised, the prisoners, the aged/elderly, the children, the crippled/lame, the homeless, the illiterate and the literate rural dwellers (IFLA, 2017). According to Amadi and Onyenachi (2021) service approach adopted by librarians and other information providers for the special groups classifies them in terms of nature of disability or impairment, their location, demographic characteristics like gender, age and others.

Education system in Nigeria

In pursuance of a qualitative educational system, government at the regional levels between 1954-1957 established free basic educational programme known as the Universal Primary Education (UPE); which was first introduced by the Obafemi Awolowo-led administration in the Western region, which was also adopted by the Eastern region under its own administration. The Northern region with its own already established Islamic education system and a held distrust for the western education failed to have similar programme in its region (Labo-Popoola, Bello & Atanda, 2009). The Olusegun Obasanjo administration in 1999 introduced the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme as a corollary to the failed programme of UPE which the federal government under the same Obasanjo at the helm of affairs adopted as a national education programme from the regional programme it originally was. The UBE programme was launched to eradicate illiteracy, ignorance, poverty as well as stimulate and accelerate national development, political consciousness and national integration. It is to provide free compulsory and universal basic education of 9-year programme, six years primary and three years post primary (junior secondary) education. It also addresses adult education, and non-formal education for the minorities and marginalised groups in Nigeria society (UBEC, 2013). Several years of the aspiration for qualitative national educational system to enhance human capital development culminated into the establishment of the National Policy on Education in 1977.

The National Policy on Education (NPE) prescribes national guidelines and requirements for the effective administration, management and implementation of education at all tiers of government (NERDC, 2014). The Nigerian educational system is structured into: early childhood care and development (aged 0-4 years old); basic education comprising the pre-primary 1-year programme, 6 years' primary programme, and the post primary/junior secondary 3-year programme (5-15 years old); the post basic education of senior secondary and technical colleges 3-year programme; and the tertiary NCE/ND/HND/BSc programmes. The NPE also recognising the need for mass literacy, an inclusive education for all; made provisions for adult and non-formal education, and nomadic education. Each tier of government is saddled with responsibilities in actualising the objectives of the NPE (NERDC, 2014).

Challenges of diversity, equity and inclusion in Nigeria's educational system

The Nigerian nation is a very diverse one. The diversity is inherent in our languages, dressings, foods, family structures and in many areas of customs and practices that make up the different cultures. Having a normative consensus among the population is necessary to achieve social cohesion and social order within the diverse nation state; in most countries, the educational system is used to strengthen or to establish the normative consensus (Hooghe, 2006; Edewor, Aluko & Folarin, 2014). Therefore, forcing integration of diverse culture which has been seen to create conflicts rather than unity needs to be jettisoned for the better approach of wilful interrelation. And one of the best places to practice this is the school as each student is a representation of a family in the larger society. Students should be allowed to work towards cultural competency; first by awakening their cultural consciousness. This can be achieved in the approaches adopted in the ways and manners they are taught.

Diversity, inclusion and equity is a very delicate area of practice as it very often touches on feelings of inequality and marginalisation, biasness and partiality against certain groups of persons who are different in terms of race, colour, gender, disability status, religious affiliation, political class, sexual orientation, social class, etc. Inclusion and diversity are concepts that often appear alongside equity and equality. Diversity is taken to be a complex and nuanced construct that represents an array of identity factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, and disability (American Psychological Association, 2017). Simply put, the perception that certain persons, classes or groups of persons are marginalised because of their difference is a major problem of

inequality or lack of equity. The practice or deliberate attempt of providing equal access to opportunities and resources to ensure that such classes or groups are embraced or accommodated is inclusion. Having a level playground i.e., same opportunity for all included is equity. In education, the concept of inclusion or inclusivity is relatable to equity, encouraging participation, removing barriers of discrimination and oppression, looking out for the wellbeing of all learners; and not just those with disabilities or learning impairments (Khot, Hujare & Killedar, 2022) encompassing inclusive education as the process of addressing the varied needs of all learners by minimising obstacles to, and within the learning environment. A child being able to attend the age-appropriate class in its locality and with individually tailored needs and not only children with disabilities, but speakers of minority languages too (UNICEF, n.d.).

In Nigeria, there is an education divide across culture and societies. Largely, perception and attitude to formal education varies among the major ethnic groups in Nigeria. Ethnic group here means groups of persons having common cultural expression and identification. As such in Nigeria, the three major ethnic groups are the Ibo, the Yoruba and the Hausa. Anecdotal evidence shows the Yoruba to embrace formal education, the Hausas to be suspicious and not totally welcoming of it, while the Ibos though majorly known for enterprise do also accept formal education (Tinuola, 2011). Further to the acceptance by some, there is still the issue of accessibility for certain classes of persons as against other classes within the same ethnic group. Accessibility of formal education differs in respect of gender, physical ability/disability, location and age among other variations. Series of government policies from the then regional government to the federal government attempted to concretize free and compulsory basic education for children of school going age. There was a success story in the Western regional government under the leadership of Chief Obafemi Awolowo during the then regional system of government. The Eastern region attempted same while the Northern region was comfortable with the Islamic education and distrust the formal education which was perceived as dangerous and likely to convert their wards and children to Christianity a religion associated with the formal education (Labo Popoola, Bello & Atanda, 2009) a cultural belief and practice that discourages formal education for the children especially the girl child.

In the study carried out by Wenenda and Okeke (2018) on diversity and inclusion in secondary school educational practice in Rivers State, they examined the concept of diversity in

the strata of social class, gender and religion. They found that significant differences in these strata influenced the decisions and choices of parents in Rivers State with regards to practice of inclusive education in the state. For example, the parents of particular religion were hesitant to send their children/ward to school that is perceived or known to have a higher percentage of enrolment of children from religion different from their own. Social class was a significant factor in inclusive education as parents on the lower rung of the social ladder were disadvantaged economically in having their children in same school with children from the upper class.

Aghauche, Udem and Aghauche (2021) in their study asserted that children with visual impairment are treated like second hand citizens, as they are often shamed and neglected; access to formal education is not readily provided to them as they are unable to fit into the regular school or use the regular information resources provided in regular schools. Their research into alternative formats of information resources provided to visually impaired students in the special schools in Southeast Nigeria disclosed a serious deficiency in information materials for these students.

The underserved and the vulnerable

There are varied categories of learners as well as are library users in the different types of libraries. One of the common attributes of libraries is accessibility of the information resources to users. In the school environment also, accessibility of classes and classroom is important. However, the physically handicapped are within a category that suffers marginalisation in the school environment and even in the libraries. There is a misconception that physically handicapped people are not supposed to pursue education since they are handicapped (Zaid, 2017). As a result of these misconception, there are biases in the educational provisions for people living with disabilities.

Classroom structures may be constructed without consideration on how such persons can gain access to it; educational resources or instructional materials are often produced in media that are not easily useable by persons with disabilities; most information resources in libraries are mostly in print and even for the digital information resources, the additional necessary assistive technologies that can aid the use of the digital resources by users with special needs (disabilities) are rarely provided (Kaunda and Chizwina, 2019). Studies have associated the marginalization of such persons with challenges such as inadequate budget, poor information and

telecommunication infrastructure, limited access to high-speed internet, low take-off of open access repositories and digital libraries, non-availability of adaptive technology and specialized software packages (Zaid, 2017).

In Nigeria, there is a sharp contrast in the treatment of the girl child and the boy child. The girl child is often treated as lesser being to the boy child. In the report by UNESCO (2018), that there are about 258 million out-of-school children of primary school to upper secondary school ages. One in every five of the out-of-school children is in Nigeria. About 10.5 million children in Nigeria are not in school. A larger percentage of this figure are found in the northern part of Nigeria; due to the issues in the Northern part of the country like gender discrimination, poverty, representing socio-cultural factors, economic factors and environmental factors. The incessant internal conflicts that bedevilled the northern region has also contributed to the menace of out-of-school children (UNICEF, n.d.) According to UNICEF (2022) 60% of the out-of-school children in Nigeria are girls.

It reported that a total of 11,536 schools have remained closed since December 2020 due to abductions and security challenges, a situation that has further denied about 1.3 million children access to education in the 2020/2021 academic calendar. It is estimated that this disruption which will cause a gap in the children's knowledge and skill may translate to loss of lifetime income as high as US$ 3.4 billion leading to further impoverishment in Nigeria. Neglecting the education of the girl child portends danger for the nation as the lack of education or dropping out of school endangers the girl child to labour exploitations, sexual violations, early marriages, unplanned pregnancies, and unsafe abortions; situations which translates to low quality life. The converse of the cliché that one who births a girl child births a nation is likewise true that where a girl child is lost a generation is lost.

While the National Policy on Education (NPE) recognises adult and non-formal education, there has been no major successes recorded in this area. The chapter of the NPE document seems to lump together the mass literacy, adult education, and non-formal education. The objectives are however clearly stated to include: i. to provide basic functional and continuing education for adults and youths who have never had the advantage of formal education or who left school too early. Some of the target group of whom are migrant folks, semiliterate adults and adolescents, and persons who dropped out or could not finish school but are now willing to continue

education; ii. To provide remedial and lifelong education for youths and adults who did not complete secondary school; iii. To provide in-service, vocational and professional training for different categories of workers and professional in order to improve their skills (NERDC, 2014).

Osuji (2005) argued that adult education and non-formal education are related concept yet semantically different. He sees adult education as any programme of education which is designed for persons who are adults in the society, while non-formal education is any educational programme organised outside the formal school system. Some challenges associated with this include social stereotypes, that an old person cannot learn new things (you cannot teach an old dog new tricks), inadequate funding, lower cognitive tendencies, and lack of motivation on part of learners. In another vein, some argued that the failure of the government to capture it within the universal basic education has slowed down its development.

Pedagogical approaches

Schools and education sector has been recognised as an institution that can strengthen integration in the face of diversity, cultural, gender, religion, social class, physical dis/ability, and other forms of identity strata (Akobo, 2016, Edewor, Aluko and Folarin, 2014). Segregation among the social identities; ethnicity, religion, gender and age, among others have been blamed for the disunity in the country like Nigeria with large divide along these identities (Rhuks, 2012, Ekanade, 2011, and Mudiare, 2013). The United Nations Agenda 2023 has as one of its goals, "inclusive, equitable quality education for all." The impact of education goals for sustainable development is interconnected to majority of the 17 sustainable goals. The goals to eradicate poverty, end hunger, ensure food security, ensure healthy life for all ages, promote full and productive employment, ensure gender equality by empowering girls and women, are multifaceted areas of education sustainable development.

Pedagogy as a study of teaching methods encapsulates the objectives of education and manners in which such objectives can be met. Psychologists have been able to impact pedagogy as a concept in their various studies with findings revealing that the intellectual growth of a pupil or learner must be developed through different phases (Britannica, n.d.).

Online learning is a method of education that is fast gaining ground. The era of the internet has made the world a global village such that getting loads of information is just a few clicks of a button or few taps on a screen. There is an avalanche of educational materials/resources that can

be accessed online. The large acceptance of internet and its use has been recognised to change the established norm of traditional learning from a physical classroom to a virtual one. Palvia, Aeron, Gupta, Mahapatra, Parida, Rosner and Sindhi (2018) is of the opinion that by the year 2025, online education is likely to be the typical form of education.

According to Chiappe (2017) open learning has been defined as "a process of knowledge sharing among educational stakeholders (teacher-student and student-student) that can be carried out anytime, anywhere, using freely available tools, either asynchronously or synchronously. Being open, it welcomes a third actor in educational activity: the community, the world." Open Teaching extends formal towards informal education in a context of collaboration and interaction where learners work as peer-partners (Chiappe, 2017). The main crux of open education being to remove barriers that ordinarily militate against certain form of learners; having prerequisites or pre-qualifications to belong to a class. The removal of such barrier will encourage diverse learners and give room to accommodate the minorities or vulnerable in the learning environment. Diverse leaners including the educationally disadvantaged, will benefit from open education because of its simplicity, flexibility and mixed methods of teaching.

Appreciation of the different culture in the society is a healthy way to promote inclusive and equitable quality education and provide lifelong learning opportunities for all. This can be achieved where individual student has deep understanding and appreciation of his own culture; and he is able to share areas of this culture with mates (Montiell-Overall, 2009). The use of purposive activities in for example, group practices under the guidance of a teacher where the teacher can guide the students to understand the similarities and dissimilarities in the different cultures portrayed, this mode of teaching that allows the students to interrelate with each other will foster the respect and appreciation of others' culture (Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, 2021). This will in the long run foster the unity that is sought in the nation. The cultural day that is being observed as a day to showcase students' individual culture is a good practice that has been adopted by schools in Nigeria, particularly at the junior level schools.

The mingling of learners from different cultural and/or religious background will orchestrate a mixture of ideologies that may in the long run affect how one sees or views education such that when the changed view is escalated to the larger group, it provides the

necessary orientation for acceptance of education by the others, especially when the orientation is coming from amongst one of theirs.

Conclusion/Recommendation

The goals served by education cannot the overemphasised. This holds true as reflected in the status accorded education in the globally acclaimed Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Education has been placed at the centrefold for quality life of a nation's citizens. It provides citizens the opportunity to put an end to or reduce poverty, and to help achieve world peace. While different reasons can be ascribed to a nation's citizens not subscribing to education, in Nigeria with its teeming population, a large percentage of her children and young adults of school age are out of school. With the challenges mitigating against these out of school children and youths, another set faced harder challenges by virtue of their peculiarities; the physically disabled, mentally impaired, vulnerable gender (girl child), and the adult semiliterate or stark illiterate. Though the vulnerable and the underserved are not particularly limited to those as discussed, this writing is limited to them so as not to widen the scope of this article, keeping it within required page limits. While there exist policies recognising and providing for the right of these set of people to education, the reality is that they are still largely discriminated against and underserved in the education system.

However, consciously implementing the pedagogical approaches that take education to the comfort zones of these set will go a long way in embracing and attending to their educational needs.

The Nigeria government has policies and laws that protect the right of these special groups to education but what is lacking is the implementation of these policies and laws. As such, a call for implementation of these laws and policies should be sounded loud and clear. Having discussed earlier some issues recognised as affecting these set of persons because of their circumstances and peculiarities, it is recommended as follows:

a. For areas in the country that the culture does not encourage formal education for its children, or in particular, the girl child, an integration of lessons that are taught in the formal classes into the informal training that are favoured by these set will make such children gain some form of literacy. A similar example is the Almajiri schools that were established some time in 2012 under the Goodluck Jonathan-led administration. The

multiplication of these establishments in most educationally disadvantaged areas due to culture and religion will provide solution to mass illiteracy in such areas (with the condition that the principal stakeholders, the mallams and religious leaders are actively involved so that they can be committed to its implementation and success).

b. To include the physically handicapped or disabled, classroom and library structures should be refurbished or constructed with ramps, elevators and enabling routes for easy accessibility.

c. Where access to formal education is due to obstacles arising from unavailability of classroom infrastructure, an adoption of mobile library and mobile classes is a solution to this problem. Open and distance learning is another approach where established schools can through affiliations and distance learning make use of others' infrastructure or properties in delivering instructions to their learners where they are located.

d. For adult education and adult literacy, radio and television programmes that can teach and educate in the local language and official language is an approach that should be adopted. This will be supported with provision of reading materials rich in local contents and assorted materials in official language in the public and community libraries.

e. In the regular schools, there should be employment for teachers/tutors skilled in teaching persons with special needs or disabilities (students with visual impairment, speech impairment, hearing disability, learning difficulties, etc.).

f. Provision of assistive or adaptive technologies like screen readers, magnifiers, text to speech programs, voice recognition to aid the physically handicapped.

g. Engaging professional librarians, and reenergising the public libraries to cater to the needs of diverse groups which is one of the main duties of the public library. With the right information resources in the libraries, persons who face discrimination in learning or education based on their disability whether physical, social or by reason of gender, could make up for the vacuum by accessing the information in the library that is well stocked in terms of diverse and various information resources that can cater to their information needs. While trained librarians cannot and should not take the place of the teacher, but in offering selective dissemination of information (SDI) and current awareness services

(CAS) they are better able to fill in gaps that a teacher attending to a class may not be able to identify as peculiar need of the peculiar learner/student.

h. Religious leaders and religious organisations should preach and practice tolerance and respect, this will in turn imbibe trust which in the face of diversity will promote inclusion and peace. Distrust breed segregation and conflict, abhorrence of things connected to the distrusted institution or organisation, including school environments and educational institutions.

i. Regular community awareness programmes should be held to eradicate the discrimination against the differently abled, weaker gender, and the aged as persons who have no business getting educated.

j. More importantly, the stakeholders should have the political will to carry out the recommendations.

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