



Equal Education Opportunity and Egalitarianism

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Introduction

One subject that has been of much interest to some stakeholders in education sectors and democratic governments all over the world, is how to achieve the ideal of egalitarianism in societies or, put in another way, how to build egalitarian societies. Many nations of the world are, in principle, aspiring to create egalitarian societies. Nigeria, for instance, despite having been under military rule for a long time, has as one of her five main national objectives the building of “a just and egalitarian society” (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1981).

The issue of egalitarianism has attracted a number of questions including that of meaning, the possibility of having an egalitarian society and modalities for building one. Egalitarianism can be achieved through equal right in all levels of educational system in Nigeria. Abdalla (2006) quoted by (Adediran and Adeniji, 2012), given the rapid pace or technological change and increasing globalization, education becomes critical in two respects. In view of this, education should be provided for all categories of children, irrespective of their sex, and background (Adediran and Adeniji, 2012).

The Concept of Egalitarianism

Despite, that has been an old-age phenomenon, however, no society is happy about the existence of social inequality and most member of any society envision a society in which all members are equal and receive equal treatment, such a society is referred to as an equalitarian society (Ejeh 2004). Egalitarianism therefore is an ideology, principle or doctrine referring to equal rights, benefits and opportunities or equal treatment for all citizens of a society. This is opposed to the elitist ideology, which refers to a few people or a selected group of people receiving some preferential treatment mainly because of some social advantages they have over the majority of the members of the society (Ejeh 2004).

Going by the principle of egalitarianism, every member of a society should by all means and under no circumstances receive equal treatment as any other member. When it is recalled, however, that individual differences exist between people right from birth it becomes obvious that equal treatment does not really mean the same or identical treatment for all. Otherwise, we will be advocating the same treatment for both the old and the young, the sick and the healthy, the handicapped and the able bodied and as Woods and Barrow (1975) quoted by Ejeh (2004) graphically illustrated, we will be insisting on identical “amount of food being provided for every individual from the new born baby to the wrestling champion. In the opinion of Woods and Barrow (1975) who advocated that the principle of equality is one and the same thing the principle of impartiality.

According to them, impartiality means treating people the same way in identical circumstances. An impartial person according to Ejeh (2004) is one who is fair and just to all people and does not discriminate between them for no just cause. Impartiality does not, however, connote non – discrimination in all circumstances. An impartial person may discriminate between people but does so with good reasons (Ejeh 2004).

Egalitarianism therefore is that of a principle in which all people in a society have equal rights and receive impartial treatment in the same circumstances.

Egalitarianism and Education

Education is one of the instruments through which most societies in the world strive for social equality or, at least attempt to reduce social inequalities among and between their members. This is because educations foster social mobility among its participants. This can be made possible if there is no discrimination against people of diverse societies based on social status among other factors. (Ejeh, 2004). An education system in which all categories of children are treated equally in the same circumstances is an equalitarian education system.

To achieve egalitarianism therefore is to design education system in which all categories of children from different background can benefit. Education according to Okolo (1985) is a transmission of knowledge, worthwhile skills, values, beliefs, e.t.c of a cultures. Education cannot be carried out without bearing in mind the aims of education.

The attempt by many countries to make their educational systems egalitarian or to afford equal educational opportunities to their citizens has found expression in the expansion of educational provision at all or almost all levels of the system. This is with the hope that increased provision will enhance the widening of access to education by all citizens. Apart from affording all citizens equal educational opportunities for social justice, liberty, the principle of egalitarianism in education is justified for a number of reason which deserve nothing (Ejeh 2004).



Emphasizing Equal Educational Opportunities

Social inequalities are inevitable especially in the developing countries of the world because of the occupational structure and the limited capacity for economic growth. While efforts continue to be made towards increasing the absorptive capacities of their economies, the relatively few available privilege should be allocated on the basis of merit and education has been seen as a good way of assessing merit. Fair play and social justice will be enhanced by “extending educational opportunities in order that all members of society have equal opportunities to compete for the limited number of position of privilege; (Thompson 1982). In other wards, no one should be discriminated against or suffer any disadvantages on account of differences in economic wealth, position or power, while competing for the limited number privileges.

Contrary to the system of education that attempts to create equal educational opportunities, is the selective or elitist system. This system as Coombs (1968) has represented by those of its rejects who, if given fair chances for advanced education would have benefited from the starting pistol but does not hold the finishing tape neither does it have control over the runners once the race is begin. If we stand in the trades of the runners, or prevent some of them from performing to the best of their ability, we shall undoubtedly violate our principle of impartiality without any justifiable reason (Ejeh 2004).

It appears that none of the above three views points offer managers of the educational system any fool – proof means of providing citizens with equal educational opportunities. This observation is, however far from suggesting that they do not offer any insights to education management on how to work to toward creating equal educational opportunities for citizens. Nor can it be said that the ideal of egalitarianism of educational systems or for designing and administering an egalitarian educational system.

Establishing Equal Opportunity in Education

Husen (1971) quoted by Ejeh (2004) has identified three aspects to the question of equal educational opportunities to people as follow: “to start education on an equal footing; to receive equal treatment during education irrespective of genetic equipment of social origin; and equal opportunity to succeed in and through education”. As close look at each of these will show what offers useful guidelines to manage of educational systems for providing equal opportunities to citizens.

In regards to the first aspect, equal educational opportunities may be ensured by removing or minimizing the differences between schools and school environments that can cause differences in the educational achievements of children. In other words, educational opportunities may be equalized by ensuring that there is no discrimination among children and schools in the allocation of human, material and other educational resources. An investigating into the availability in American education by Coleman and his team (1966) quoted by Ejeh (2004) and similar studies elsewhere, however, show that only a small amount of variation in children achievement can be accounted for by variation in the amounts of educational resources in schools. This is mainly because differences in the educational attainment of children are caused by some factors that have to do with their home background over which schools have little or no control. Awareness of the impact of such factors have compelled some rich countries such as Britain and United State of America to establish schemes for helping those schools and neighbourhoods in which children were most severely handicapped (Halsey, 1973). It is doubtful, however, if such schemes can ever make such children start education on equal footing with their counterparts from educationally stimulating homes and neighbourhoods.

The second approach to equalizing educational opportunities is to ensure that all children receive equal treatment during education irrespective of genetic equipment or social origin. It has been argued above that giving equal treatment to all children irrespective of their natural individual differences does not ensure equality of educational opportunities to them. Giving them the same treatment such as subjecting the handicapped and normal or even precocious children to the same curriculum and same instructional methods does not ensure equality of educational opportunity to the different groups of children. If however, the differences between them are recognized and form the basis for discrimination positively among them, then an attempt has been made towards equalizing educational opportunities for them. This does not necessarily contradict our principle of impartiality because in this and similar cases, there are good reasons for discriminating between the different groups.

The third point to equalization of educational opportunity is to afford students or pupils equal opportunities to succeed in and through education. At the present state of knowledge and practice, however, no educational system has succeeded in effecting equality of opportunity to achieve success. Equal educational opportunities can be enhanced if parents can participate actively in school administration particularly in decision making. Positive discrimination by the local education anticipative in favour of very poor neighbourhood in respect of allocation of educational resources will enhance equalization of educational opportunity.

To ensure the maintenance of standards among the schools and to promptly take any necessary remedial actions the school needs to be effectively supervised.

- (a) **Secondary Education:** In compliance with the principle of egalitarian, education at this level should be free. There should be a smooth transition from the primary to the secondary school without any screening device if possible. Ideally, the number of secondary schools should be enough to accommodate all the products of primary schools.



- (b) **Higher Education:** Access to this level of education will therefore not only consist of providing a wide variety of programmes personnel and material resource to meet the different interests to the students but will also include various financial incentives to especially those from poor homes in order to encourage them to stay on at school. Equality of educational opportunity requires that financial assistance be provided to such students, if they cannot afford the costs, to study the relevant courses elsewhere.

Recommendations and Conclusion

In order to give citizens equal educational opportunities, government in each countries especially developing countries should be able to offer them educational programmes to cater for their different interest. Curriculum planners should not develop programmes alone, but also to design teaching methods and instructional materials that will facilitate learning and increase students chances of achieving success. Husens (1971) stated that equal opportunity include equal opportunities to succeed in and through education needs to be given serious attention. Conclusively, egalitarianism which is an ideal principle worth adhering to. In an attempt to achieve this ideal, however, all hands must be on the deck as some of the problem in the way of its achievement are more than any one societal institution or organization can overcome.

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