

Egalitarianism and Management of Education

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ABSTRACT People of diverse backgrounds including scholars, sociologists, political scientists, philosophers, statesmen and educators are interested in the achievement of the ideal of egalitarianism in societies. In this paper the concept of egalitarianism is examined and applied to education. The various ways of achieving egalitarianism through the provision of equal opportunities to individuals in education are considered. The role of educational managers in ensuring the principles of egalitarianism are adhered to at different levels of an educational systems and the challenges facing them in so doing, are put forward.

INTRODUCTION

One subject that has been of much interest to some scholars, notably sociologists, political scientists, philosophers and educators, and most 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, 1981:7).

The issue of egalitarianism has attracted a number of questions including that of meaning, the possibility of having an egalitarian society and the modalities for building one. It is not our intention here to delve into a philosophical analysis of the concept of egalitarianism but to arrive at a meaning of the term and relate it to education. We shall also examine the place or role of educational management in the building of an egalitarian society.

THE CONCEPT OF EGALITARIANISM

People in all human societies all over the world differ with respect to the amount of material wealth, prestige and power that they have. In other words, all human societies exhibit social inequality. Reissman (1973: 9) succinctly put it this way:

“Social inequality is as old as human history, as universal as human societies. Everywhere and in every epoch there has existed some form of stratification with those at the top holding

more privilege, power, and enjoying greater rewards than those at the bottom. Inequality, not equality, has been the predominant social rule by which most men at most times have lived.”

In spite of being an age-old phenomenon, however, no society is happy about the existence of social inequality and most members of any society envision a society in which all members are equal and receive equal treatment. Such a society is referred to as an egalitarian or equalitarian society. Egalitarianism is, thus, 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 select group of people receiving some preferential treatments mainly because of some social advantages they have over the majority of the members of the society.

Adhering to the principle of egalitarianism implies that every member of a society should, under all circumstances, receive the same or 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 Borrow (1975: 165) graphically, illustrate, we will be insisting on identical “amount of food being provided for every individual from the new born baby to the wrestling champion...” Instead of identical treatment, it may be better to think of the principle of egalitarianism as demanding that people be treated the same except

when there are differences between them to justify treating them differently in particular circumstances. This writer, therefore, shares the same view with Woods and Barrow (1975) who state that the principle of equality is one and the same thing as the principle of impartiality. According to them, impartiality means treating people the same way in identical circumstances. An impartial person 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.

The concept of egalitarianism adopted in this paper is, therefore, 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

One of the instruments through which many societies in the world strive for social equality or, at least attempt to reduce social inequalities among and between their members is education. This is because education fosters social mobility among its participants. This can only be made possible, if there are no barriers preventing some people from participating in it or if there is no discrimination against people based on social status among other factors. An education system in which all children are treated equally in the same circumstances is an egalitarian education system. A necessary step towards reducing social inequalities, therefore, is by designing and operating an egalitarian education system.

Ironically, some educational systems served to maintain or even enhance social inequalities before their remarkable expansion almost all over the world. Before this, education was the prerogative of a small elite. It served the needs of a few people rather than the many. This was especially the case in the early 19th century England where the provision of free elementary education was only made possible by charitable and religious bodies whose aim was primarily moral. Secondary schools were providing for the needs of the middle and upper classes (Banks, 1976). The same thing was true of secondary education in Nigeria before the 1970's and in many other countries. Schools being relatively few in number and serving only the

interests of the few who could afford it, secondary education in Nigeria was largely non-egalitarian.

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 *per se* the principle of egalitarianism in education is justified for a number of reasons which deserve noting.

JUSTIFICATION OF EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

One of the primary concerns of modern democratic governments in the world is to improve the capacity of the people as a whole to participate actively in the management of their own affairs. They are also pre-occupied with maintaining political stability. An effective way of ensuring these is to widen access to education and make it available to both the young and the old in their societies.

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 privileges 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 positions of privilege," (Thompson, 1982: 64). In other words, 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 of 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 aptly pointed out, wastes human resources represented by those of its rejects who, if given fair chances for advanced education, would have benefited from

it and passed on some of the benefits to the society. According to him, no modern economy, if it is to prosper, can afford such a waste of human talent. Equal educational opportunity, if put into effect, goes a long way towards harnessing all of the human resources of a nation for economic development.

Providing the justification for the creation of equal educational opportunities is, however, not as difficult as solving the problem of how to provide them. This is partly because equal educational opportunity is somehow an ambiguous concept. It is to this issue of provision that we now turn.

PROVIDING EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IN EDUCATION

Husen (1971: 14-15) has identified three aspects to the question of equal educational opportunities to citizens as follow: "to start education on an equal footing: to receive equal treatment during education irrespective of genetic equipment or social origin: and equal opportunity to succeed in and through education". A close look at each of these will show what promise it holds or the extent to which it offers useful guidelines to managers of educational systems for providing equal opportunities to citizens.

In regard 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 and other educational resources. An investigation into the availability of equal educational opportunity in American education by Coleman and his team (1966) and similar studies elsewhere, however, show that only a small amount of variation in children's achievement can be accounted for by variations 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 backgrounds over which schools have little or no control. Awareness of the impact of such factors has compelled some rich countries such as Britain and the 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 opportunity 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 recognised and form the basis for discriminating 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 of children.

The third viewpoint to equalization of educational opportunity is to afford pupils equal opportunities to succeed in and through education. This aspect seems to draw our attention to the fact that it does not suffice to provide educational resources and widen access to education in various ways for citizens without making sure that they also have equal opportunities to achieve success through education. At the present state of knowledge and practice, however, no educational system has succeeded in effecting equality of opportunity to achieve success.

Most countries, especially the rich ones, have only taken various steps technically and legally towards providing equal educational opportunities for their citizens. In other words, they are as at now able "technically and legally, to set the game of equality in motion but appear unable to guarantee equality at the end of the game" (Midwinter, 1975: 67-68). The equality game can be likened to a race in which a sovereign state ensures that competitors start on equal footing. According to Midwinter (1975), the state fires

the starting pistol but does not hold the finishing tape neither does it have control over the runners once the race is begun. If we stand in the tracks of some 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.

It appears that none of the above three viewpoints offers 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 towards creating equal educational opportunities for citizens. Nor can it be said that the ideal of egalitarianism has no implications for the management of educational systems or for designing and administering an egalitarian educational system. We shall now highlight the role or place of educational management in attempting to build an egalitarian society.

ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT

Educational management can simply be defined as a process of achieving certain educational goals and objectives through group efforts and use of available resources. It consists of such specific functions as identification of goals, planning, organizing and budgeting, controlling, coordinating, directing, staffing and evaluating. Each of these functions is preformed by educational managers at every level of political administration and every level of the educational system. A description of each of these functions needs not concern us here as much as painting in broad strokes how to utilize the whole process of management or aspects of it in establishing and administering egalitarian educational systems. For purposes of convenience we shall highlight the roles of educational management at the different levels of the educational system.

The Pre-Primary Education Level: Mention has been made of the fact that many of the factors that can lead to under-achievement by pupils at schools can be traced to their home backgrounds. If children from poor or deprived homes are to participate on anything near equal grounds in primary schools, then special efforts should be made by education management to provide enriched pre-primary education programme for them.

Pre-primary education, especially in the underdeveloped parts of the world, including Nigeria, is still for a few parents that can afford it. Children of such parents, under normal circumstances, have some advantages over those whose parents cannot afford it when both groups of children enter the primary school. If all children are to start education on equal footing, therefore, they must all have access to pre-school education.

Such pre-school institutions may be provided by local governments or local education authorities but parents should have a greater say in their administration. Such institutions should be available in every neighbourhood, within easy reach of parents. One major problem that comes to the fore in the establishment and operation of these institutions is lack of adequate funds. They need not, however, require very elaborate physical plants. If they cannot be provided free of charge, the financial burden may have to be shared with parents. For deprived neighbourhoods, the idea of Educational Priority Areas as practised in British Education (Halsey, 1973), has much to recommend it. In such areas, parents should be made to show some signs of commitment either by paying some token fees or by contributing in kind. The amount of financial support given by the Local Education Authorities should vary inversely with the poverty levels of neighbourhoods. Pre-school institutions should be effectively supervised and their programmes continuously evaluated for purposes of identifying weaknesses and effecting necessary remedial actions. The principle of equal educational opportunity at this level demands, among other things, that no parents should be discriminated against in the admission of children to pre-school institutions.

Primary Education: The principle of egalitarianism demands that children from any pre-school institution should be admitted in any primary school of the parents' choice. It also demands that primary schools should be provided in adequate numbers for children of school age. Application of school mapping technique will show the number of primary schools that should be adequate for a given locality as well as the specific places where the schools can be sited. They normally should be within walking distances of the children and their parents. Attendance at this level should, of course, be free and compulsory.

School plants should be set up by the local education authorities in close collaboration with the local communities. Equal educational opportunities can be enhanced if parents can participate actively in school administration particularly in decision-making. Positive discrimination by the local education authorities in favour of very poor neighbourhoods 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 schools need to be effectively supervised.

Secondary Education: In compliance with the principle of egalitarianism, 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. Educational managers have to ensure not only that primary school products have access to secondary education through provision of adequate educational resources and other relevant policy measures but also have to ensure that each child has equal opportunity to develop his or her potentials or interests in any discipline as any other child in the same and other disciplines. It behooves educational managers to provide comprehensive education at this level with non-streamed classes. Educational institutions at this level should be capable of meeting the needs of students with purely academic interests and those with vocational interests. The implications for resources for this kind of education are obvious enough. The need for adequate curriculum planning to cater for the different needs of students including relevant instructional methods and materials to sustain their interests in their various programmes is strongly indicated. Supervision and evaluation at this level should be carried out at regular intervals with the same objectives as for the lower levels of educations.

Post-Secondary Education: Many people who qualify for entry at this level of education may not take up their places if they cannot meet all or any part of the costs of their education. Access to this level of education will, therefore, not only consist of providing a wide variety of programmes, personnel and material resources to meet the different interests of 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.

It is only very few (if any) countries in the world that can provide enough educational resources to cater for the wide variety of interests of students at this level. The non-availability of certain programmes in local institutions should not, however, deprive interested students of the opportunity to follow such programmes. 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.

In the countries where post-secondary education is not free, as is the case in most developing countries, equality of educational opportunity can be enhanced by educational managers through the establishment and operation of various bursary awards, grants and scholarship awards. Where these are not possible loan schemes from which students can borrow to finance the costs of education and pay later, should be established and effectively operated.

Widening of access to post-secondary education should not be limited to only graduates of secondary schools and equivalent institutions. Education management should also create equal educational opportunities for those in the work force who want to participate in post-secondary education and other workers who wish to improve on their skills after leaving such institutions. For such people, access to education at this level can be provided by educational managers through the organization and effective administration of sandwich courses, part-time, day-release or block-release courses, correspondence courses and other programmes of study which may not entail the losing of one's job while undertaking such courses.

Putting all these and other measures into effect most often requires much more money than many societies can afford and more commitment than most decision-makers and implementers of education policies can make. In addition to these, the inherently non-egalitarian nature of human societies and other factors pose some problems and challenges to those who are committed to the ideal of egalitarianism. We now summarize some of them.

PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

The problem of the very high costs of providing equal educational opportunity has been highlighted above and needs no further elaboration. The challenge to education managers is to generate more funds internally to supplement state subventions to education. They also have to identify ways of sharing the cost burden between the consumers and the state in such a way as to ensure that consumers from socially disadvantaged homes are not discriminated against.

In order to give citizens equal educational opportunities we should be able to offer them educational programmes to cater for their different interests. The challenge to curriculum planners is not only to develop such programmes but also to design teaching methods and instructional materials that will facilitate learning and increase student's chances of achieving success. Husen's (1971) concept of equal opportunity as including equal opportunities to succeed in and through education needs to be given serious attention. In this regard, too, educational guidance counsellors are challenged to device appropriate techniques for detecting students' potential abilities and improve on their skills in giving them needed help in career choices in order to achieve success in life.

If the offer of equal educational opportunities to all children is to have much meaning, their parents should be able to participate actively in their education and make informed choices. The present level of adult illiteracy especially in many societies militates against this. This problem poses a great challenge to our adult educators and education managers to device effective adult education programmes that will be relevant to the needs of the illiterate adults and secure their interests and effective participation.

The principle of egalitarianism often raises some moral problems for managers of the

education system especially with regard to the education of precocious children or the mentally gifted. Going by our principle of impartiality, do we not have enough reasons to discriminate in favour of the gifted children? Will discriminating in their favour not enthrone elitism? This question is pertinent because of the inter-connection of the whole pattern of life-styles. It does not require an expert to observe that housing, income, health, social class and education all seem to intertwine.

In spite of all these problems, egalitarianism is an ideal principle worth adhering to. In our attempts to achieve this ideal, however, all hands must be on the deck as some of the problems in the way of its achievement are more than any one societal institution or organisation can overcome.

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