

Applying the Principle of Equality to Interrogate and Advance Teaching and Learning in a Developing Educational Context

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Abstract

This paper sets out to point out the need to promote the quality of educational delivery in a developing context. By educational delivery is broadly meant to capture the process of providing education and the desired outcome of education. The work applies equality as a desirable value that can lead to this process and attempts to discuss how teaching and learning can promote or reflect the virtue of equality. The work illustrates how the absence or lack of equality in African social life has affected the desirable gains of education negatively and how this can be held to emanate from the educational process. It then proceeds to illustrate how the virtue of equality can be applied in teaching and learning.

Keywords: Equality, Teaching and learning, Educational value

The Idea of Equality and Its Gains and Promises

Equality can be defined as that virtue in terms of which items are held to have the capacity and potential to influence each other and to expect a balanced outcome from each other proportionately in interacting with each other. It is a state in which a person, institution or organ does not suffer any deprivation and deficiency either in its nature or potential and has the capacity to engage others of the same rank with the same capacity and resources. Equality amounts to a measured or desired proportionality in worth, significance, value and meaning.

At least four values can be itemised as gains that derive from the principle of equality. The first is that equality leads to and promotes a conception of the virtue of *justice*. The second is that equality promotes the virtue of *egalitarianism*. The third is that equality accepts and enhances the idea of *dignity* among the human community and the fourth is that equality generates *respect* among human beings. To begin with (i), equality promotes a conception of justice. The concept holds that justice means treating equals equally and unequals unequally. This idea of justice interprets it as giving each person his or her due in the right means and right means and as that which guarantees the availability of same to others. This theory of justice which owes its origin to one of Plato's dialogues implies that justice amounts to meeting a desirable dividend based on allocating rights and responsibilities based on the principle of equality. The implication of this is that justice can only be held to

obtain especially in the socio-political demands of the term among a group of people when there is an identifiable measure of balance in the resources that are allocated. Through this “fixed or measured sameness” within a given specie a living entity can identify with another on the grounds of justice. The implication of this is that a basic assumption of justice can only be assigned to an organism if it is held to be same rank with other organisms of the same order. Equality in this regard can be held to demand a basic sameness or background. For instance all human beings are held to be equal or implied to be equal on the ground that they have thirty six chromosomes each of which has basic potential for actuation. Similarly, all human beings have the same natural inheritance and occupy the same natural space. This order confers the same terrestrial status on human beings and demands that everything should be constituted to respond to the demand of this sameness. For instance, while justice demands that human beings should feed to live, another aspect of justice also means that human beings should feed according to measure of their need for food such that those who need more tons of food to feed should be given more at the cost of others’ feeding. Here, what is at work here is what can be called the equality of human nature and the meaning attached to it, and how this should drive the basis for justice.

The second value that can be derived from equality is egalitarianism. This value demands that we apply a basic disposition that demonstrates the acceptance of the uniformity or sameness of human desire in sharing the gains and pains of social belonging. An egalitarian social ethic is one which accepts a measured sameness, valued oneness and a communitarian ethics as principles of social relations; one that practices an ethics of inclusiveness and admits members on the principle of sameness and oneness. Thus what is at work here is what can be called the equality of human nature and how the meaning attached to this should drive the basis for justice. An egalitarian society would for instance promote a worldview which encourages the ethics of participation and discourage the principle of alienation and estrangement.

The third value that can be derived from the principle of equality is dignity. By dignity I mean a measure of meaning that places high regard or status on a person or agent. Dignity implies or demands the ascription of the virtue of nobility to an item whereby the item is allowed to exist or operate on its own end and in such a manner that its distinction is upheld and recognised. Dignity is often defined by the level of autonomy and regard that is applied to an item. To be dignified is to stand-out with a high mark of regard and value. When an item is held to be dignified its status is believed to be sacrosanct as to disallow any alteration. It is seen to be noble and to deserve care and protection which makes it imperative not to harm the item or to interfere with its worth, value and status. For instance, when bio-ethicists talk of the dignity of human life the view implied is that just by being a life belonging to a being that is human, human life has inherent dignity. This view de-emphasizes (or at least does not principally emphasize) all such demands as the quality of life in question, the potentials of the life in question, and the needs of the life in question as defining constituents of the life in question as the basis on which the idea of dignity should be upheld.

The fourth value that arises from equality is the virtue of respect. When a person is held to be equal with others there is little chance that the person will be

held in contempt or disregard. Respect is a principle that demands a disposition to permit the other to be as different and unique as is desirable to the agent. It is a disposition to a desired difference and the ability to resist the temptation to hold the other with disregard. Respect preserves or permits the being of the other corporately and totally without affecting the items that affect the component of the item. In relation to the individual it demands allowing the faculties and principles of man –will, reason, body, spirit, body, to function in the way that preserves and defends the being of the other. Respect demands the need to honour an individual by ascribing a measure of value or worth to the individual. The virtue of respect demands that we approach the other with regard- the kind that pre-disposes us to subordinate (or coordinate) our worth to the worth of the other person or at least permit the other to function in a manner that defends the demands of his or her status.

After the attempt to explain the meaning of equality the question that borders us in relation to this work is articulate the role it is desired to play in educational delivery and how it can be held that such role is desirable. To address this question it is urgent to note that education shapes the entire society and shapes the outlook of individuals and that, to the extent that this is the case, then a core human value such as equality should attract a concern as to the kind of relationship it is supposed to have in relation to the educational process. Thus if education has as much power and influence as to shape the individual and the society significantly it is important to consider the kind of relationship it could have with such cardinal human value as equality given the outstanding significant virtues it confers on the human person. Can education which promotes inequality shape the society positively? What would happen when and if educational delivery ignores equality as a significant social variable that should define and shape the human society? And if equality is held to be a desirable value in the educational process, in what significant way should this be understood such that it would not affect the need for creative difference which is the life wire for growth and development. To address these concerns I will next articulate in what specific terms it can be held that the absence or lack of the virtue of equality has affected educational delivery in the African context and in what specific terms it should be applied to address this concern. By doing so, I wish to defend the claim that even if the wide implications of the insertion or absence of equality in educational delivery cannot be captured, there are specific measures that can be applied to locate the need for equality in educational attainment.

Locating the Problem with Educational Delivery in the Developing African Context through Inequality

It would be fair enough to hold that nearly all of what can be categorized as the major problems of modern Africa can to a large extent be said to be caused by educated Africans. It would also be fair to argue that there are missing civic values that lead to these problems among which is the problem of equality of citizenship. The major problems of Africa, briefly captured, include developmental problems in all its forms: political, economic, social and moral, etc.; corruption, bad leadership, poverty, poor standard of living and bad governance and by educated Africans, I mean those who have gained formal education in Africa. To the extent that education serve as a denominator to locate the cause of these problem and that lack of civic

values stand at the heart of this problem it becomes desirable to investigate this in relation to equality.

Indeed a strong position that can be held on the poor state of development is that things are the way they are because educated Africans who are agents of development, and, who should apply the gains of education to proper development of the African state, have not done so positively. The other plausible position is that the educated African has been unable to do this because of what can be called the ill-equipped resources employed for the task of advancing development. It can further be held that this is the case because of the wrong kind of education received; by which I mean the kind of education that serves wrong goals and ends. The implication of this is that there is need to probe the kind of education received to understand the dilemma of development in modern Africa and proffer a reliable solution in this regard.

As a matter of fact the evidence of what can be called the weakness of education in Africa can be found, not essentially in the lack of growth in terms of physical structures or population of those who could be said to be formally educated, but in the fact that there is no match anywhere between this population and the qualitative development of the citizens of African states in terms of the desired impact of the human sciences. Such impact includes an improved concept of man which should lead to an improved sense of human worth and dignity, a modernized human culture and a humane society.

The trust and belief in education as the instrument of qualitative growth and development and proper advancement of the human society is nowhere in doubt in Africa and this to a large extent justifies the claims made here in relation to education. Nearly all countries in sub-Saharan Africa have educational institutions in all levels of learning. Education, as it is often applied to cover both learning in the human sciences and other sciences in general, has always been valued in Africa since the inception of modernity. Drawing from the Nigerian experience a cluster of examples justifies this claim. Olu (2004), a Nigerian and black African, refers to education as “the greatest investment for economic, social, political and cultural development”. Akpachafo (cited in Ogunu, ed., 1990:80) recalls that as far back as the pre-independence days in Nigeria, education was seen and believed to be “the key to development, emancipation of the black race and an instrument of progress”. Fafunwa, foremost scholar and former Minister of Education in Nigeria, refers to education as “the greatest investment that the nation can make for the quick development of its economic, political, sociological and human resources” (Fafunwa in Alubo and Briggs, 2004:28). From the above positions anchored on the Nigerian experience it can be seen that education has strong value in Africa. In concrete terms, education in Sub-Saharan Africa is still seen as the key to a good salary, and high standard of living and quality life, and the belief in education as a key factor to human development is almost like the belief in religion as a key factor in human salvation given the dreams, hopes and aspirations that are built into and around education.

A curious problem that arises from education is the fact that it has failed to play the role of an effective agent of development by balancing the hopes and aspirations with reliable cultural dividends. By reliable cultural dividends, I mean quality social services, industrialization, effective social systems, high and reliable economic growth, productivity and a high life expectancy.

To demonstrate this I shall apply a comparative study of the growth of university education in Nigeria with growth in productivity of Nigeria – a prominent sub-Saharan African country – bearing in mind that universities provide the highest level of educational delivery and that productivity is a tangible measure of growth of any human society in terms of improved capacity to apply their potentials and resources.

In Nigeria, the rate of economic growth is almost inversely proportional to the growth of universities at least in the past decades. By growth in this instance, I mean the expansion and increase in size and volume. The GDP of Nigeria between 1960 and 1990 was at the ratio of 3.1% (1960-1970), 6.5% (1970-1980), and 1.4% (1980-1990). Specifically at the level of industry, a key indicator of economic growth, the ratio was 16.0% (1960-1970), 8.1% (1970-1980), and 1.2 (1980-1990). (See Chike F. Okolocha, *Discourses on Underdevelopment*, p.85) In a comparative manner, the years 1960-1970 and 1980-1990 and 1990 till date mark the different phases in the growth and expansion of the Nigerian university system. Indeed the years (1980-1990) experienced one of the sharpest increases in the number of universities in Nigeria in relation to the population index of the country. This is because the law enacted by the federal government allowing states to run their own universities came into effect in this period. This law which came into effect in 1982 saw the establishment of several new universities to complement the existing ones. Given, therefore, what could be called the valorization of the education industry through this development, it should normally be anticipated that national productivity would witness a sharp rise since fresh manpower should add energy and vigour to productivity. For instance, several courses take a maximum of four years to turn out manpower for the society so it is not arbitrary to expect industrial growth and output as a result of the sharp rise in educational opportunities. Yet, as can be observed from the data above, the reverse was almost the case.

One reason that could be advanced against this position is that an increased number of universities does not mean an increased number of industries and employment opportunities and that it is thus not very logical to expect a sharp rise in the gross national product as a result of the growth of the number of universities. The other reason is that many of the courses offered by the universities may be in the area of human sciences and the human sciences do not seem to have a direct effect on industrial and economic outputs. But this is where the whole idea of education in Africa lends itself to a critical questioning, for it is clearly right to expect from education all the mental structures needed to advance and develop a people's economy. The idea of education should imply wealth creation, either through direct exploitation of natural resources or through the kind of innovation that makes the human mind a form of wealth. The idea of Francis Bacon that knowledge is power to influence and recreate the world finds its relevance here, for education should imply the desire for innovation which should be understood to imply the capacity to create. Thus, the growth of the education industry ought to compel growth in innovation and productivity and hence more economic growth. It is, therefore, right to call the Nigerian situation, whereby we have an increasing population of the ostensibly educated but a decreasing output from education in terms of the cultural dividends, an irony and an embarrassing state of affairs. The reason for the persistence of human problems can be located in the quality of ideas applied to address the

problem and ideas are the product of the quality of the minds that produce them. In the light of these it becomes relevant to attempt to locate the cause of the problems outlines with the view to providing solution. One of the problems that can be held to be the cause of this, is the absence of the virtue of equality in the educational process. In the subsequent part of this paper I shall attempt to illustrate how this is the case after which I will proceed to advance a claim that there is the need to apply the principle of equality in developing the teaching and learning as a way to address this problem.

Equality as a Missing Variable in Educational Values of Modern African

In the African setting, it can be conveniently held that education has provided knowledge which has more potential for generating inequality than promoting equality. Julius Nyerere the pioneer president of Tanzania and a foremost African intellectual provides views that support this claim. He submits that education in Africa, “induced attitudes of human inequality and in practice underpinned the domination of the weak by the strong, especially in the economic field” (cited in Mutiso and Rohio, 1975). Similarly K.O. Moalusi submits that education in Africa;

...denies the colonized useful knowledge about themselves and their world, while at the same time it transmits a culture that embodies and is designed to consolidate a slave mentality. Hence the colonized are taught that they have no history, that their history started with the arrival of the European conquerors on their mission to civilization. (Moalusi, 1994: 100)

In a more radical but compelling position Ngugi wa Thiong’o, a consistent critique of colonialism, affirms this claim and likens education in Africa to a form of mental conquest characterized by violence. As he puts it:

Berlin of 1884 was effective through the sword and the bullet. But the night of the bullet was followed by the morning of the chalk and the black board. The physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom. But where the former was visibly brutal, the later was visibly gentle. (Ngugi, 1980:9)

Although Moalusi and Ngugi wrote with reference to colonial education, the fact is that education in Africa is still trapped under this colonial form and structure. There is not much change that can be celebrated in this regard as education in Africa still duplicates or produces what can be called colonial elitedom. Here, it is no longer the effort to make a people deny their history or collective identity but to deny themselves as individuals with peculiar differences which should be promoted and tolerated.

Thus Africa still advertises an educational design that has no promise in terms of promoting equality as a social principle and which has generated negative but enduring consequences both for the individual and for the African society. For the individual this form of education has led to a false sense of the self and the inability to relate with others on the principle of equity; as a result, many members of the educated class in Africa misapply the virtues of education to promote what can be called the cult of elitism. In demonstrating this status, such norms as equality before the law are discarded in favour of impunity before the law.

For the larger African society the absence of equality in the social process has led to what can be called the perpetuation of the dependency syndrome in Africa making it impossible for the people to assume full masters of their destiny and to define and evaluate themselves through a clear self-concept. Hence, Africa remains materially and mentally dependent on other races of mankind in knowledge production, religion, economy, and all other values that shape the mental universe of a people. A way to address this problem is to argue that equality as a virtue that should direct the educational process.

Applying Equality to Promote Teaching and Learning

After the effort to articulate the problems arising from the absence of strong developmental values in Africa and locating the extent to which this inequality constitutes a fundamental aspect of this problem let me proceed to map out how equality can be applied to improve educational delivery and how by doing so, equality can be infused into the educational delivery. To do this I will (i) look at equality from the point of view of the demands of the teaching profession (ii) look at how equality can form part of the course content and (iii) how equality can be made to constitute a virtue in the teaching process.

As it applies to the teacher the virtue of equality can be applied to enhance educational delivery by way of centring educational ethics on the significant human ideals such as egalitarianism and oneness. By this I mean de-emphasising the virtue of difference in educational delivery and building a wall of difference around the privileged knowledge that the teacher has and from where the authority arises. This measure demands that teachers become ordinary and unassuming, and allow as much as is possible, the possibility of intra-human relationship in the teaching process. Here the teacher would then understand his role, not just in the sense of being an instructor but being a leader whose disposition has the capacity to influence the attitudes and ideals around which the students will adopt for life.

For this reason the teacher should see his authority not totally in terms of administrative authority whereby competence will solely be judged the mode of administering lessons but how he is able to influence the students to appreciate the equality of human nature from where the need for knowledge arises. In this regard the African commune-humanitarian ethics becomes a desirable and valuable virtue for teaching ethics. According to this principle we are human beings for, by, through and with other human beings. This humanistic philosophy is properly expressed by the John Mbiti when he says that

for the Africans being human is a derivative from the human relationship. As he puts it, the thesis in Africa is;

I am because we are; and since we are, therefore, I am. This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man (Mbiti, 1970, p.141).

In the same vein Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984) holds that in contrast to western epistemology that

abstract this or that feature of the lone individual and then proceed to make it the defining or essential characteristics which entities aspiring to the description "man" must have the African view of man denies that persons can be defined by focusing on this or that physical or psychological characteristics of the lone individual. Rather man is defined by the enviroing community (1984, p.171).

The implication of this for a teacher who wants to advance the ethics of equality is that teaching becomes a way of seeking to enhance a form of understanding and a platform for socio-communal ethics where the ability to create and promote social bonding becomes the ideal. Thus, it is not just a matter of transmitting knowledge but also creating and affirming the ethics of oneness as a fundamental desirable ethics of learning.

The second option for promoting equality as an educational value is to design courses around the ethics of care, sympathy and empathy and by so doing, incorporate them as desirable educational values. To do this, then, it has to be made explicit that the exigencies of human life would normally and usually lead to or bring about those who cannot compete favourably with others in the society - the disabled, the weak and those who out of no making of theirs might find themselves at the receiving end of social forces. The implication of this is to locate a learning process and a value system that would naturally accommodate this class of people.

Indeed it would seem that religious education often takes care of this. But to leave this social demand of knowledge at the mercy of religion shows that the society lacks the disposition to see it as an inherent aspect of social life and to advance a non-religious educational process that can accommodate this. The implication is that it would amount to seeing their absence as a desired feature of the society and not their presence. But if teaching and learning incorporates the ethics of care it would then be seen that the underprivileged has a right to be in the society and that they are an anticipated component of the human society.

For the teaching process, the virtue of equality could be advanced in several ways. The first is to attempt to subvert the divisive vice of inequality by way of creating forums that link both the privileged and underprivileged members of the society. It is to apply an educational technique that demonstrates that equality however difficult it is to achieve it, is a more desirable social ideal.

At least two options can be applied to demonstrate this. The first is to periodically create educational forums where the privileged and the underprivileged members of the society can interact. The second is to promote competitions between the worse off in the "privileged schools" (defined as schools where the educational opportunity is more viable and reliable) and the best of the "underprivileged

schools” (defined as schools that are majorly populated by those who lack access to educational capitals and resources). This is a significant way to bridge the gap between these two segments of the society and to create the basis for a healthier human social belonging. The second is to deliberately organise classes in schools where the worse-off in the society live such as ghettos and the shanties. The essence of doing this is to emphasize the humanity of the underprivileged and to create an attitude that sees them as a constitute part of the society who are desired and desirable in their own right.

The final option to emphasize equality as a social ethics in teaching and learning is to advertise selected biographies that illustrate the potentials and possibilities of egalitarianism and the gains of adopting a worldview that accommodates all peoples, irrespective of class and affiliation. This will enable the student to achieve a more profound and functional insight into the gains of a social belonging that improves the rich, the poor and the middle class.

Conclusion

This work has attempted to provide a strong theoretical basis on which equality should be applied in educational delivery. The study applied a number of earlier positions advanced in existing research to abstract the deficiencies of the current educational paradigm and how it has led to inequality in the larger society. Anchored on these findings the need to improve educational values in favour of equality has been articulated and illustrated. Although the work did not carry out an experimental study of this proposal such as what it would look like- if the principle of equality finds a space in the construction of educational syllabus or outlines-it will be desirable if this can motivate for more scholarship and further researches are done in this direction.

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