

Education and Social Equity in Nation-Building: Sociological Pathways to an Inclusive and Skilled Nigerian Society

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Abstract

Education remains a vital sociological instrument for fostering social equity, national integration and human capital development. This paper explored the interconnectedness of education, social equity, and nation building and emphasised how sociological insights can illuminate pathways towards an inclusive and skilled Nigerian society. Drawing from functionalist, conflict, and human capital theories, the paper argued that education serves as both a mechanism for social reproduction and a potential catalyst for transformation when guided by equity-oriented policies. The paper discussed the concepts of education, social equity, nation-building, inclusive and skilled society. It also highlighted how unequal access, socio-economic stratification, and neoliberal influences widens educational disparities, thereby weakening the prospects for inclusive nation building. The discussion advanced the view that education should move beyond credentialism to become a vehicle for empowerment, social justice, and participatory citizenship. The paper concluded that achieving an inclusive and skilled society requires reimagining education as a sociological process that promotes fairness, cultivates skills for productivity, and reinforces social cohesion essential for sustainable national development. The authors suggested that government and educational stakeholders should among others promote quality and inclusive education, increase funding of education, reform curriculum, enhance teacher training, integrate social justice principles, and promote skilled-oriented learning.

Keywords: Education, Social Equity, Nation Building, Inclusiveness, Skill Development.

Introduction

Education stands as one of the most powerful instruments for promoting social equity, cohesion, and national development. Haralambos and Holborn (2017) explained that education is not merely a process of knowledge transmission but a fundamental sociological institution that shapes values, skills, and identities within a society. Different societies use education to nurture citizens to be able to participate meaningfully in economic, political, and cultural lives which will enable them contribute to nation building. In developing nations like Nigeria, the challenges of building an inclusive and skilled society remains central to educational and social policies. Okebukola (2020) asserted that education serves as the bridge between individual potential and collective progress but unequal access, poor quality, and socio-economic disparities have continued to hinder its transformative roles.

From a sociological perspective, education functions as a tool for social integration and inequality. Functionalist theorists such as Parsons (1961) and Durkheim(1956) argued that education fosters shared values, discipline, and social solidarity which are essential for national unity and development. Conversely, conflict theorists like Bourdieu (1986) and Bowles and Gintis (1976) maintained that education often reproduces existing class structure by privileging dominant groups, while marginalising the less privileged. In this sense, education becomes a contested terrain where social equity must be consciously pursued through inclusive policies, equitable funding, and curricula that reflect diverse social realities.

Social equity in education refers to fairness and justice in access to learning opportunities and outcomes which ensure that every individual regardless of gender, class, ethnicity, or religion can realize his/her potential (Fraser, 2020). A socially equitable education system empowers marginalised groups and strengthens social cohesion which is crucial for nation building. According to Akinyemi and Abiddin (2021) educational disparities remain visible across urban and rural divides, gender lines, and socio-economic backgrounds in Nigeria. Such inequalities limit human capital development and weaken the nation's capacity for sustainable growth. Consequently, addressing inequalities in education is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity for building a productive and cohesive nation.

From a sociological stand point, nation building extends beyond physical infrastructure or political governance to creation of shared identity, citizenship values, and collective responsibility among citizens (Odukoya, 2020). An equitably structured education serves as the foundation for this process by equipping individuals with skills, civic awareness, and a sense of belonging. It nurtures both technical competence and social consciousness that align individual aspirations with national goals. However, Giroux (2014) expressed that neoliberal ideologies in educational policy which emphasises competition, privatisation, and market efficiency has often undermined the social justice mission of education. This results in school that favours only economic elites, which reinforces inequality and erodes the inclusive vision necessary for national progress. This paper therefore, examines the roles of education and social

equity as a transformative force in nation building and as well navigates the sociological perceptiveness to an inclusive and skilled Nigerian society.

Review of Related Theories

Education remains a central institution in sociological understanding of how societies evolve, sustain social order, and promote equity. Collectively, functionalist, conflict, human capital, and social justice theories illuminate the complex interplay between education, equity, and nation building. While functionalist and human capital perspectives highlight education's integrative and developmental roles, conflict and social justice theories reveal its potential to perpetuate or mitigate inequality. Adebayo (2022) noted that building an inclusive and skilled Nigerian society requires educational reforms that balance efficiency with equity and promote both national development and social justice.

Conflict Theory

The notable conflict theorists, Karl Marx and Pierre Bourdieu challenged the optimistic view of education as an equalising force. Marx argued that education often serves as a tool for reproducing class inequalities, maintaining the dominance of the capitalist class by legitimising the existing social order through ideology and credentialism. Okeke (2020) espoused that in Nigerian context, disparities in access to quality education between private and public institutions mirror Marx's analysis of the educational system as an apparatus of social reproduction. Bourdieu (1977) further developed this view through his concept of cultural capital and habitus which suggested that educational success is largely dependent on the cultural resources inherited from one's family background. Thus, education in Nigeria can perpetuate inequality when curriculum design, pedagogy, and assessment favour the cultural codes of the elites, while those from disadvantaged communities are being marginalised.

Human Capital Theory

The human capital theory by Becker (1964) proposed that human capital theory situates education as an investment that enhances productivity and national development. According to him, education equips individuals with skills and knowledge that contribute to economic growth and personal advancement. In Nigeria, the drive towards vocational and technological education aligns with this theoretical standpoint which emphasises education as a pathway to economic empowerment and nation building. Eze and Udu (2019) argued that without addressing structural inequalities, the benefits of human capital formation may remain unevenly distributed, and social stratification will be reinforced.

Social Justice Theory

The feminist structural contributions of Rawls (1971) and Fraser (2020) provide a normative framework for evaluating educational equity. Rawls' principle of "Justice as fairness" advocates for equal access to opportunities and the prioritization of the least advantaged in policy design. Applied to Nigeria, this theory underscores the moral imperative for redistributive educational policies such as scholarships, inclusive curricula, and affirmative action that promote equal participation of marginalised groups. Fraser (2020) expanded this discourse through her three-dimensional theory of justice redistribution, recognition, and representation. She argued that true social equity in education requires not only fair resource distribution but also cultural inclusion and political voice. Addressing issues such as gender disparity, regional inequality, and linguistic marginalisation in education in Nigeria reflects Fraser's integrated approach to social justice.

Functionalist Theory

In the opinion of Durkheim (1912) education from the functionalist perspective is a moral institution that socializes individuals into the shared norms and values essential for social cohesion and collective solidarity. Durkheim emphasized that the school serves as a "miniature society" that transmits collective conscience and prepares individuals for participation in the larger social system. This in Nigerian setting reflects how educational system seeks to integrate diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious groups into a common national identity. Similarly, Talcott Parsons (1959) extended Durkheim's functionalist theory by positing that education functions as a key socialising agency that allocates roles based on meritocratic principles. Parsons' notion of "school as a social bridge" underscores the transition from the particularistic standards of modern society. Out of the four theories, the work is anchored on the functionalist theory that sees the functional role of education in Nigeria as pivotal for nation building because it aims to foster a sense of civic responsibility, national unity, and skilled manpower necessary for socio-economic development (Obiama, 2021).

Concept of Education

Education is a vital sociological tool for fostering social equity, national integration and human capital development. Okafor and Eze (2018) posited that education remains a pivotal social institution through which individuals acquire knowledge, skills, and values essential for personal and national advancement. Ogunyemi (2020) added that it functions as both a tool for empowerment and a means of addressing structural inequalities that impede social mobility. Education in Nigeria is not only a human right but a strategic driver for achieving national cohesion and sustainable development. However, challenges such as poor access, regional disparities, and inadequate policy implementation continue to hinder the realization of equitable educational outcomes.

Concept of Social Equity

Social equity according to Adebayo and Ayodele (2021) emphasised fairness in distribution of opportunities and resources to ensure that all individuals, regardless of the background can attain their full potentials. It transcends mere equality by focusing on justice and inclusiveness in social and educational systems. Fraser and Honneth (2019) remarked that achieving social equity requires both the redistribution of material resources and the recognition of diverse identities. Inequalities in Nigerian education context are reflected in the urban – rural divide, gender gaps, and socio-economic imbalances that marginalize certain groups from accessing quality education (UNESCO, 2022). Akinyemi (2023) espoused that promoting social equity entails implementing inclusive policies that target the disadvantaged, while promoting diversity and representation within the educational framework. A sociological examination revealed that equitable access to quality education enhances social justice, strengthens national unity, and accelerates human development.

Concept of Nation Building

In contemporary sociology, nation building refers to the deliberate process of fostering a unified, stable, and progressive national identity through institutions, values, and participatory governance (Nwosu, 2019). Okebukola (2021) remarked that education serves as the most effective instrument for this process because it nurtures civic values, social responsibility, and the skills necessary for innovation and productivity. Nation building is the set of political and social processes through which a political community comes to be understood as a coherent nation with a shared identity and set of loyalties that align a population with a state's institutions and boundaries (Wimmer, 2018). Wimmer (2018) and Paglayan (2021) agreed that nation building in contemporary time, is framed not as a single policy but as an interaction of socialization between education and media. A nation's strength lies in its human capital, hence investing in equitable and inclusive education contributes directly to social cohesion and national prosperity. Adeyemi (2024) explained that strengthening the link between education, social equity, and nation building is crucial for overcoming historical inequalities and preparing citizens for active participation in a globalised knowledge economy. Hence, education, social equity and nation building are deeply interwoven pillars for achieving an inclusive and skilled Nigerian society.

Concept of Inclusive and Skilled Society

An inclusive and skilled society represents a sociological ideal where all individuals regardless of gender, class, ethnicity or location have equitable access to opportunities for learning, participation, and contribution to national development. Akinyemi (2023) explained that inclusivity in this sense entails dismantling structural barriers that hinder marginalized groups from accessing quality education and employment. Fraser and Honneth (2019) noted that it is rooted in the principle of social justice which advocates for fairness in the distribution of resources and recognition of diverse social identities. UNESCO (2022) espoused that building an inclusive society

in Nigeria requires educational policies that promote equal access, ensure gender parity, and address regional disparities in literacy and skilled acquisition.

On the other hand, Adeyemi (2024) posited that a skilled society denotes a population empowered with relevant knowledge, technical competence, and critical thinking skills essential for economic productivity and social transformation. Okebukola (2021) opined that education serves as the primary vehicle for skill formation which enables individuals to adapt to evolving labour market demands that contribute meaningfully to national development. Ogunyemi (2020) observed that the development of a skilled and inclusive citizenry in Nigeria is central to nation building because it enhances innovation, civic engagement, and economic resilience.

In essence, an inclusive and skilled society reflects the intersection of equitable education, social justice, and human capital development. It underscores the sociological argument that a nation's progress depends not merely on access to education but also on the inclusiveness and quality of skills imparted to all citizens. Therefore, to achieve an inclusive and skilled Nigerian society necessitates sustained investment in equitable and skills-oriented education that empowers every individual to contribute to national cohesion and sustainable development.

Education as a Pathway to Social Equity in Nigeria

Education serves as a fundamental pathway to achieving social equity by providing individuals with the knowledge, skills, and opportunities necessary to overcome structural inequalities and participate fully in nation development. Adebayo and Ayodele (2021) stated that through equitable access to quality education, societies can reduce social disparities rooted in class, gender, and geography. Okafor and Eze (2018) observed that in Nigeria, education functions not only as a tool for individual's advancement but also as a mechanism for redistributing social and economic opportunities among the marginalised populace. Akinyemi (2023) noted that when inclusive educational policies are implemented, they help break cycles of poverty, empower vulnerable groups, and promote fairness in resource distribution which strengthens social cohesion.

According to Fraser and Honneth (2019) social equity demands both redistribution of material resources and the recognition of social differences which ensure that all groups have an equal voice in the structure that govern them. Ogunyemi (2020) agreed that education operationalizes these principles by fostering civic consciousness, tolerance, and participatory citizenship. Adeyemi (2024) added that skill-oriented and inclusive education enable disadvantaged groups to compete effectively in the labour market which reduces inequality and enhances social mobility. To this end, nation building agenda in Nigerian education remains the most viable pathway to achieving social equity because it simultaneously promotes human capital development, social justice, and sustainable societal transformation.

Education, Skills, and Nation Building

Education remains a fundamental instrument for nation building because it equips individuals with the knowledge, competence, and values necessary for societal development. In contemporary discourse, education serves as both a social equaliser and a catalyst for national productivity and innovation. According to Okoli and Nwafor (2020) education provides the human capital foundation upon which modern economics are built which enables citizens to participate effectively in economic and civic life. Similarly, Adeyemi (2019) posited that skill oriented education enhances employability and fosters self-reliance which reduces unemployment and poverty levels that undermine national cohesion. Eze and Ogbu (2021) highlighting the need for skill based and inclusive education reforms argued that the mismatch between educational outcomes and labour market demands in Nigeria has hindered sustainable development. Furthermore, Olayemi (2022) expressed that a nation's ability to mobilize and utilize skilled manpower determines its global competitiveness and social stability. This implies that integrating technical, vocational, and digital skills into the educational framework is crucial for building an inclusive and resilient Nigerian society. UNESCO (2023) emphasized that education that prioritizes both equity and skill developments is indispensable for achieving sustainable nation building in the 21st Century.

Sociological Pathways towards an Inclusive and Skilled Society

Sociological perspectives emphasize that achieving an inclusive and skilled society requires addressing structural inequalities and promoting equitable access to education and opportunities. According to Adebayo and Okonkwo (2019) inclusion in education fosters social integration by ensuring that marginalized groups such as women, persons with disabilities, and rural populace participate fully in national development. Becker (2018) asserted that human capital theory investment in education enhances individual's productive capacities and contributes to societal progress. From a functionalist perspective, education serves as a mechanism for social cohesion, transmission of shared values, and skills essential for national stability (Parsons, 2016). However, conflict theorists, cautioned that educational inequalities perpetuate class stratification unless deliberate policies are made to promote social justice (Bourdieu, 2017 & Fraser, 2020). Ogunleye and Musa (2023) agreed that in Nigeria, inclusive educational reforms and skills – based programme have been identified as crucial sociological pathways for reducing inequality and fostering social mobility. These pathways integrate vocational training, digital literacy, and community – based learning to empower citizens and strengthen social solidarity. Hence, developing an inclusive and skilled Nigerian society depends on policies that merge equity, education, and empowerment within a socially just framework.

Challenges and Critical Reflections in Education, Social Equity, and Nation Building

Despite the recognised role of education in fostering social equity and nation building, several challenges persist that hinder the realization of an inclusive and skilled Nigerian society.

1. **Deep-rooted inequality of access to quality education:** According to Adewale and Yusuf (2019) one major challenge of education in fostering social equality and nation building is the urban and rural disparity as well as socio-economic classes. This inequality perpetuates a cycle of poverty and limits the development of human capital needed for national growth. Sociologically, Bourdieu (2017) argued that educational systems often reproduce existing class hierarchies through unequal cultural and social capital distribution which reinforces exclusion rather than reducing it.
2. **Outdated curriculum:** Eze and Olatunji (2022) said that curriculum in many Nigerian institutions are outdated and poorly aligned with the needs of a modern economy driven by technology and innovation.
3. **Problems of redistribution, recognition, and representation:** Fraser (2020) critically noted that without addressing these issues, educational reforms may fail to achieve genuine social justice. Hence, the challenge lies not only in expanding access, but also in restructuring educational systems to be inclusive, skills-oriented, and socially transformative for sustainable nation building.

Conclusion

Education remains a vital instrument for achieving social equity and nation building, especially in developing societies like Nigeria. It serves as the foundation for human capital development, empowerment, and social transformation. A well-structured and inclusive education system not only bridges socio-economic divides but also equips citizens with the knowledge and skills necessary for national productivity and progress. However, persistent inequalities in access, poor funding, inadequate infrastructure, and the misalignments between educational outcomes and labour market needs continue to limit its transformative potential.

Becker (2018) and Fraser (2020) emphasised that sustainable national development depends on educational systems that integrate both equity and justice and also ensure that all citizens have equal opportunities to learn, work, and contribute meaningfully to the society. The sociological pathways towards an inclusive and skilled Nigerian society require deliberate policy reforms that prioritize inclusion, skills acquisition, and social justice. Education therefore, must be re-envisioned as a tool for empowerment rather than mere certification, fostering of critical thinking, creativity, and citizenship values. Strengthening vocational, technical, and digital education, while ensuring that fair resource distribution will enable Nigeria to build a resilient and equitable society. Ultimately, the success of nation building hinges on the extent to which education becomes inclusive, skilled-oriented, and responsive to the dynamic needs of both individuals and the nation at large.

Suggestions

Based on the multifaceted challenges of the paper, the authors made the following suggestions:

1. **Promotion of quality and inclusive education:** Equal access to quality education for all citizens regardless of gender, socio-economic background, or location is very crucial.
2. **Increased funding of education:** Government should increase funding and improve financial investment in education.
3. **Transparency:** Accountability in the management of educational resources should be strengthened by the government and educational stakeholders.
4. **Reformation of curriculum:** An improved curricula that emphasize practical, vocational, and digital skills relevant to modern labour market demands should be encouraged.
5. **Enhancement of teacher training:** There should be a continuous provision of professional development and technological training for teachers to improve instructional quality.
6. **Alignment of education with industrial needs:** There should be collaboration between educational institutions, industries, and government agencies to ensure employability and innovation.
7. **Integration of social justice principles:** Policies that promote fairness, recognition, and representation in education to address systemic inequalities should be implemented.
8. **Encouragement of community participation:** Local communities should be involved in educational planning and monitoring to promote transparency and collective ownership.
9. **Promotion of skill-oriented learning:** Technical and vocational education programmes should be expanded to build a skilled and self-reliant workforce.

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