

## The Importance of Education to Youth Employment in Africa

**Dr. Chukwu Ezechi**

General Studies Division,  
Imo State Polytechnic, Owerri  
[ezped@yahoo.com](mailto:ezped@yahoo.com)

### **Abstract**

*The paper argues that education is an important tool for the empowerment and productive engagement of the African youth. While it is acceptable that there are schools in Africa from primary to university level, the paper insists that education in African schools should be reformed to be labour market oriented, especially from secondary school level. The nucleus of the argument is that education in African schools mainly starting from the secondary schools should be aimed at capacity building, skill acquisition and development of programmes that would be structured to basic professions like painting, cookery, carpentry, ICT, tailoring, fishery and other basic agricultural related fields. African countries today lack 21<sup>st</sup> century artisans as often, university graduates find it difficult to be engaged with such professions with dignity, while secondary school leavers lack the basic skills and professional knowhow to be either self-employed or engaged by others on graduation. Tertiary education ought to be employment driven, in harmony with prevailing labour-market realities. It is by the development of policies by governments in this direction can education reasonably add value to the African youth and the continent at large. The research methodology is analytical.*

### **Introduction**

The importance of education to the society is quite fundamental. Both formal and informal education is geared towards the happiness and fulfillment of man as a being with material and spiritual components. The first part of the work takes a general look at the concept of education in human formation at large. The aim here is to give a general idea of how necessary education is in the development of human being irrespective of his location, race or colour. In this direction, education is espoused as an integral part of human nature irrespective of whether man has attended formal education or not. Thus, morality and ethics are part of man in the society and these are basic aspects of human life, which constitute education, even before man enters the four walls of academic institution. Right from the family, the youth have started receiving education which forms part of their training as social actors.

The work takes a step further by analyzing the importance of formal education on the other way. Formal education is ascertained to be vital in seeking to understand the universe better, thereby enabling man to acquire a systematic and advanced knowledge of reality. Thus, through formal education, it is easier for man to develop his potential better, have access to the labour market and opportunities which abound in the society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Having seen all the merits of formal education, the work goes further to identify the challenges of formal education in Africa and explains that those impediments pose a thorough setback to the socio-economic advancement of the African youth. The nucleus of these challenges is the fact that African youths of today acquire a general academic knowledge which does not actually develop their skills and capacities for a better engagement in the labour market on graduation. It needs to be recalled that: "Nonetheless, education has a close relationship with the world of work. Societies expect schools to develop in young people the knowledge, attitudes and skills which will enable them to contribute to the economy" (Dale, 1989: 9).

The paper therefore proffers that education can be an important tool for the empowerment of the present generation of African youth, only when academic programmes, especially from secondary school level incorporates the curriculum on technical, vocational and basic professional courses. After all: "Young people and their parents, too, expect schools to help them to enter a worthwhile job" (Ibid: 9). The work observes that there are already existing pro youth empowerment initiatives in education, from both African Union (AU) and the United Nations Organization (UNO), but the work argues that those policies need to be either revisited or reformed, in order to confront the challenges of post education engagement in Africa headlong. Thus, the type of education needed by the present African youth is the one that should engage and empower them on graduation. The work eventually ends with conclusion which is a recap of the vital points raised.

### **Education and Human Formation**

It is virtually impossible to describe human life without education, just as any man without education is as good as having lost his seat of reason, otherwise called intellect. The ancient Greek philosophers defined philosophy as the love of wisdom, an affirmation which implies that every human being is a philosopher since man has the natural tendency to know. Since man has the natural inclination to inquire and give answers to his object of wonder, man is then an education oriented being, thanks to his intellectual prowess. Adequate education is then key to the fulfillment of human nature because man desires to align with given attitudinal and institutional behaviours as a social being. Education is therefore fundamental for the material and spiritual wellbeing of man. Every man needs to be educated in order to identify where his individuality ends and where it intersects with that of other people. In addition, education enables man to live a fulfilled, decent and happy life.

All known human societies have had one form of education or the other. However, it has to be stated for the sake of clarity that education is either formal or informal. Informal education is usually part of human interaction and socialization starting from the family. Formal education on the other hand is the systematic education and training which is received through institutions and recognized bodies. In any case, both formal and informal education is vital for human formation in general. The morals, values and instructions which families impart to their members are part of education and they go a long way in shaping the ideals and worldview of such people. More so, since man is born in the society and depends on the society for his survival, the culture in which he is raised nurtures him with certain values and formations which in effect also determine how he perceives life and his responsiveness to exigencies.

From all indication, man continues to be educated irrespective of whether it is formal or informal. Informal education on the other hand has no bounds as it transcends all aspects of human life. As we have noted all along, the family plays an important role in this direction, in addition to the care and protection which it gives to the children and members of the family at large. Man, in addition is a product of formation through cultural transmission. We need to understand that culture is not something that is necessarily taught in the four walls of academic institution. Hence: "A moment's reflection, however, will disclose that a very considerable part of culture, even in a society whose members are literate, is of a nonliterate or nonliterary variety and that this part of culture too is transmitted from one generation to the next. It is also clear that the family is instrumental in performing this service" (Bierstedt, 1974: 415). This important role of the family in human formation is undoubtedly evident at least during the early years of the child. In this vein, the family is not only a biological guarantor of human continuity and principal cultural propagator it is also a fundamental agent of education and human formation.

Irrespective of the absence of formal education, primitive people were yet law-abiding, as they observed their existing custom as part of their education. The elders were usually looked up to as custodians of customs and traditions. Priests wielded varying degrees of influence in various societies, as the intermediary between the dead and living. In the primitive epoch: "The young are educated in the customs, religious, legal, and dramatic, of the tribe, and in its myths, as well as in its economic and military activities. There are recognized standards of tribal morality, a word which etymologically means simply approved custom" (Thorndike, 1948: 32). The central argument here is that without formal education, man is still a subject of formation in line with his customs, traditions and culture, even in the primitive Age. In fact, even during the time of Homer and Hesiod in the ancient Greece, centuries before the advent of formal philosophy, myth was even used as a means of education of the young and human formation in general. This is a further indication of the fact that every given society has always had one way or the other for the education of its people.

### **The Essence of Formal Education**

Man as we have emphasized earlier has the natural tendency to know and eventually proffers as much solution as possible to the objects of his wonder. While informal education is necessary for the fulfillment of man as a moral and rational being, formal education on the other hand builds on the already existing natural knowledge in the quest for a refined human knowledge and systematic knowhow. McKay, Hill & Buckler (1984: 6) stressed that through education, human being developed his skills, which eventually became cultural patterns and by so doing, he transforms his environment for a better living. In fact: "Formal education may now begin with nursery school or kindergarten and end with advanced postgraduate training, taking up a substantial proportion of an individual's entire lifespan" (Chinoy, 1967: 384). The academic institution has become an important agency of human formation and socialization in the modern Age. With the help of reason and desire to give answers to the wonders which surround existence, man has succeeded in advancing his fundamental knowledge through formal education. By

virtue of formal education, he has succeeded in developing to a large extent the commensurate technical wherewithal which enables him to explore the universe and dominate the world.

The relevance of formal education is enormous to both the individual and society. Man as we know has the capacity to make use of abstract thought and logic and that is why mathematics for instance has advanced much in history. It is also obvious that with the help of the intellect, man has advanced in formal education through the manipulation of symbols, signs and words, thereby enhancing communication and human formation. In short, with the expression of these symbols in form of signs and letters, or even pictorials, written language is developed, creativity grows and human literacy increases, thereby adding to the development of the individual and the society. (Harrison, Sullivan & Sherman, 1985: 13). Education, both formal and informal is a powerful medium of cultural transmission.

For any justification: “If a generation fails, for one reason or another, to transmit a part of its culture to the succeeding generation, that aspect of the culture will simply disappear and may have to be reinvented or rediscovered at a later date” (Bierstedt, 1974: 130). No doubt, formal education plays a vital role in the transmission of cultural heritage in this computer Age and advanced technology. In fact, it is certain that: “Culture, in the sociological sense, is also something that is shared, not something that one person alone can possess. An isolated inventor may succeed in making a gadget in his laboratory that does all sorts of unusual and wonderful things, but if no one ever uses it except himself, it does not become a part of culture” (130). Formal education is then the pedestal of modern human civilization and cultural transmission across language backgrounds and divergent milieus.

### **The Concept of the Youth**

The strength of any nation lies on its youth. The youth is the symbol of continuity in every nation, since it represents the bridge between the infant and the old. Most countries of the world make provision for the ministry of youth, since the youth usually constitute the bulk of most national populations. In addition, the work force of various countries of the world is generally dominated by the youth. The point remains that to joke with the youth of a country is to gamble with both the present and future of such a country in question. Sometimes it is difficult to define who is a youth, considering the fact that some people argue that age is all about personal feeling and individual values.

However, the idea of youth in this work embraces more or less those within the age bracket of adolescence to thirty years of age or thereabout because: “Today, we think of *childhood* – roughly the first twelve years of life – as a time of freedom from the burdens of the adult world” (Macionis, 1997: 139). It will be wrong to define youth as only an adolescent because that would not be enough to capture a reasonable picture of the actual youth bracket. In fact: “As industrialization gradually framed childhood as a distinct stage of life, adolescence emerged as a buffer between childhood and adulthood. Corresponding roughly to the teenage years, this is the stage of life when young people establish some independence and learn specialized skills required for adult life” (Ibid: 139). Generally, adolescence is the period when the child exhibits a deep sense of emotional and psychological differentiation from that of childhood and adulthood. This is usually the period young children want to disengage themselves from their parents and struggle to establish their own sense of identity.

The major problem is to identify precisely the exact period a child transforms from childhood to adulthood. It is a common knowledge that in most poor and underdeveloped countries, especially Africa and Asia, under-aged children are often associated with child labour, nevertheless, we cannot classify them as neither youth nor adult. The role of adolescence differs from one socio-cultural background to another. While many young ones start working from their adolescent years: “Wealthier teens, however, have the resources to attend college and perhaps graduate school, which may extend adolescence into the late twenties and even the thirties. For different reasons, of course, poverty also may extend adolescence” (Macionis, 1997: 140). The bottom line of the argument is that youth age generally stretches from adolescence to early adulthood since: “Early adulthood – from twenty to about age forty – is generally a time of working toward many goals set earlier in life. Young adults break free of parents and learn to manage for themselves a host of day-to-day responsibilities” (Ibid: 141). In this vein, it is more justifiable to position youth bracket from late adolescence to early adulthood for a better and proper understanding of the subject matter. Thus, youth in this context is averagely within the age bracket of fourteen to thirty years, depending on environment and circumstance.

### **The Challenges of Formal Education in Africa**

Education as we have noted earlier is fundamental in the life of every human being. Formal education in addition is quite vital for the intellectual awareness of man and better integration into the modern world which is now a universal community as a result of advancement in technology and sciences. Formal education in this modern Age is necessary for social integration and since men have the natural right to be educated, a worthy government should promote this ideal and accept it as a duty, in the interest of the society. (Williams, 1961: 141). With the help of computer and internet, modern communication network and improved scientific know-how, formal education has come to take a more important role in the society. Obviously, Africa needs quality and competitive education to enable the youth of the continent to integrate into the international labour market and for their commensurate socio-economic empowerment. Without adequate vocational and academic wherewithal, African youth of today are better said to be in self-inflicted neo- incarceration. The fact remains that education is one of the major challenges of the African youth, considering the poor quality of formal education on the continent, compared with other continents of the world.

Some scholars and researchers have aligned with the need to revisit a functional knowledge based and employment oriented education to meet up with African needs. In the researched paper entitled: “Africa’s Education Crisis: In School but not Learning”, Justin W. Van Fleet who doubles as a researcher on education with focus on developing countries and also who serves as the Chief of Staff to UN Special Envoy for Global Education, unveils the challenges of going to school in Africa without acquiring the needed skills and knowledge. The findings of his research reveal that of the 128 million school-aged children in Africa, the tendency is that about 17 million out of them will never go to school as a result of some socio-economic realities. However, the greatest challenge is the fact that another 37 million African children are to acquire very poor education while they are in the school, to the extent that there would not be much difference between this group of pupils and those who did not go to school at all. Evidently, such a situation portends doom for Africa’s future socio-economic development. (<http://www.brookings.edu>. Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> September, 2015).

By making use of data from regional examinations, the barometer for instance gives the picture of the learning environment in about 28 countries of sub-Saharan Africa. It is however discovered that a good number of the students scored below the cutoff point; an indication that they learnt so poorly that they could not add any value to their education. The findings are actually ridiculous because there are about seven countries in which the children failed woefully because 40% of them could not meet up with the minimum standard of learning, positioned between grades 4 or 5. In fact: “In countries such as Ethiopia, Nigeria and Zambia, over half of in-school students are not learning basic skills by the end of primary school....Under the current model, half of sub-Saharan Africa’s total primary school population – 61 million children – will reach adolescence without the basic skills needed to lead successful and productive lives” (<http://www.brookings.edu>. Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> September, 2015). Though according to the Millennium Development Goals Report 2014, there is increase in primary school enrolment on the continent, but the same increase is proportionally less in secondary and tertiary education enrolment, especially for female. In this vein, the gross female youth enrolment rate to education and literacy programme is relatively low.

### **Youth Empowerment in Africa through Education**

While education is a sine qua non for youth empowerment in Africa, the nature of education they received ought to be in conformity with not only the continent’s need, but should also be congruous with the 21<sup>st</sup> century global market. Education in Africa must be human capital development oriented, to enable the continent to harness the human and intellectual resources in the youth for African development. The continent should embark on the type of education which in addition, would increase the entrepreneurial wherewithal of the African youth, to enable them be self reliant on completion of their tertiary education in particular. It is understandable that: “Intrinsic educational values are subordinated to the extrinsic need to provide tickets to employment” (Dale, 1989: 15). If the continent refuses to review her educational policy which should aim at producing professional artisans and technicians on graduation at secondary school level, in harmony with modern technological exigency, it will risk in the near future to graduate students from secondary schools, whose certificates would be equivalent to advanced first school leaving certificate.

It is unfortunate that the current educational setting in Africa at large is not structured as to engage graduates from secondary school in the labour market. Actually, some government policies like the Nigerian 6334 educational system is fantastic on the paper, but a mere window dressing in practice. The truth of the matter is that if it is implemented as it ought to: “The 2-tier system with its emphasis on functional and job oriented education should go

a long way in elevating commercial, secretarial, mechanical, technical and scientific studies” (Shagari, 1982: 67). The fact that government developed such a wonderful academic blueprint without taking concrete steps by successive governments for its implementation makes a mockery of the entire model. The objective of this system is structured in such a manner that: “Whether students leave after 3-years of secondary education or complete the full 6-year course, the new system should produce more and better craftsmen, mechanics, technicians, engineers, scientists, dairy farmer, artists and painters” (Ibid: 67). It is therefore evident on why educational enrollment has increased on the continent while unemployment, underemployment and general underdevelopment continue to hold sway.

Unfortunately, one of the major problems of Africa is the lack of will on the part of political class to implement good policies, because the policies have been there, but bereft of practical follow-up. Education in Africa should be made to serve the social need of the society since: “The school is a special environment, established by the members of society, for the purpose of simplifying, purifying, and integrating the social experience of the group so that it can be understood, examined, and used by its children” (Ornstein & Levine: 139). With the lack of adequate education which will enable the African youths to be reasonably engaged on graduation, either from secondary or tertiary institutions, the tendency is there that many of them would be vulnerable to socio-economic and political crisis, as idle people they are.

At national governments and African Union (AU) levels, there should be the need to formulate youth policies, with emphasis on educational youth development, which would incorporate skill development/acquisition, technical education and practical entrepreneurial studies which takes cognizance of ICT tools. Education must aim at human and social development. That is to say: “In addition to general education, the study of technologies and related sciences and the acquisition of practical skills, attitudes, understanding and knowledge relating to occupations in various sectors of economic and social life” (Mfam, Kyrian Ibi, 2009: “Vocational and Technical Education: Panacea for Achieving the Millennium Development Goals in Nigeria” in *The Voice of Teachers*. 17) To this end: “Education therefore must first and foremost be linked to economic growth” (Shagari, 1982: 66).

It needs to be recognized that in roughly the past two decades the United Nations (UN) has encouraged the establishment of regional and global initiatives to enhance youth development. At the continental level, African Union has also taken several initiatives to confront youth related challenges. These initiatives include: The New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), which established a youth desk to give young Africans the opportunity for not only dialogue, but to use the platform to contribute to constructive policy debates. Others include the African Youth Charter, launched in 2006 by African Union Heads of State which is geared towards youth empowerment through rights, duties, freedom, skill development and education. Other instruments developed by AU include: African Union’s Second Education Plan of Action (2006-2015) which is a framework for the provision of the right to education and the development of relevant skills which would enhance access to good work. The 2009-2018 Ten-Year AU Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment and Development is also not left out, among others.

However, the million dollar question remains: Why have these noble initiatives not yielded the desired result? Why has the impact not been undoubtedly felt? This is why the whole youth policy in Africa needs to be revisited holistically by giving education in Africa a pragmatic labour/market oriented approach in tandem with the current global trend. The fact remains that: “Africa’s failure in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are deeply intertwined with the broader question of how the region’s education sector is complementarily evolving in accelerating progress and the larger implications for sustainable development” (Salihu K. T. & Musa J. W., 2009: “The Role of Technical Education in the realization of the Millennium Development Goals MDGs” in *The Voice of Teachers*: p.72).

Education helps man to actualize his potential and also contribute to the societal wellbeing. African governments should understand that education of man must inculcate his personal welfare and common good. African schools therefore should equip the students and give them “a mass of valuable information and train them in certain techniques so that they can earn a living, integrate with their fellows, and do the things the State requires of its citizens” (Sheed, 1960: 4). The Action Plan by different indigenous African governments and AU must focus on youth education with emphases on skill development and expertise, starting from the secondary school level. Secondary school leavers in Africa today are regrettably not prepared or formed for the market at any level. This is absurd because their academic curriculum ought to incorporate practical and technical education in basic

professional studies, in areas like carpentry, fishery, snailry, pottery, painting, bakery, ICT, welding, tailoring, bricklaying and cookery etc. In fact, the list is endless, as the practical acquisition of such knowledge would help those of them who want to study in a similar line of thought in tertiary institutions, while the ones who do not intend to continue can be easily assimilated into the labour market.

### **Conclusion**

Education as we have seen is part of human nature, especially informal education which is an output of human reason. The fact that man is endowed with intellect is a criteria for deliberation an reflection over human actions. Formal education on the other hand helps man to acquire advanced and systematic knowledge over the wonders of the universe. Africa needs quality education like many other nations of the world for a better life and better society. African youth constitutes the bulk of the continent's population therefore anything which affects the youth must in one way or the other affect the entire continent. Knowledge is power and education unlocks potentials and frees man from ignorance. African youth therefore needs a worthy formal education for purposeful life and practical empowerment. Education in Africa must be result oriented. "University programmes will be intensified and diversified for the development of higher level manpower within the context of the need of the economy" (Shagari, 1982: 67). Education on the continent must be reformed to incorporate skill acquisition and capacity building, to enable secondary school leavers especially to acquire practical knowledge that would engage them properly in the labour market on graduation.

Education of the African youth should go beyond the idea of going to school for the sake of learning. It should inculcate the preparation of the young ones for the demands and challenges of the society in relation to employment and development. If education does not empower the youth its aim becomes abortive. Education, it should be noted is a means of preparing the youth for their adult roles and responsibilities (Banks, 1976: 5). African youth therefore could be empowered and subsequently emancipated socio-economically through the acquisition of quality education which would enable them be gainfully employed or engaged on graduation. According to the findings of Africa Learning Barometer, the continent has made progress in education in the last one decade, at least in terms of enrolment. In any case, while this seemingly development is worthy of commendation, there is still a strong learning crisis facing Africa, which needs to be given due attention. Hence: "Unless African governments and the international community work together and act now to raise standards and improve learning outcomes, the potential of tens of millions of African youth will be wasted and Africa's social and economic progress will stagnate" (<http://www.brookings.edu>. Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> September, 2015). Efforts therefore need to be made by both African Union and different countries to address the challenges of formal education on the continent, through result-driven policies and programmes that would yield practical solutions.

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