

THE CRISIS IN EDUCATION AND THE QUEST FOR NATIONAL RENAISSANCE: A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY

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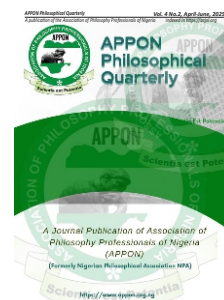
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ABSTRACT

The contemporary Nigerian State is facing profound educational crisis, manifested in poor quality of instruction, declining moral standards, and a widening gap between educational outcomes and national developmental needs. This paper interrogates the nexus between education and national renaissance through the philosophical methods of analysis and hermeneutics. Analytically, it examines the structural deficiencies of the current educational system, questioning its philosophical foundations and alignment with the ideals of nation-building. By critically evaluating inherited colonial frameworks and the dominance of utilitarian, certificate-oriented learning, the paper exposes how education has been reduced to an instrument of social mobility rather than a transformative tool for collective renewal. Hermeneutically, it interprets the meaning of education beyond the confines of formal schooling, situating it as a cultural, ethical, and political enterprise essential for reawakening national consciousness. Drawing insights from African philosophical thought and global educational theories, the study argues that a genuine national renaissance requires a value-laden system of education and one that is contextually grounded, and philosophically attuned to the ideals of justice, solidarity, and human flourishing. The paper concludes that the revitalization of Nigeria's educational philosophy is indispensable for reversing national decline, fostering civic responsibility, and engendering a renaissance that speaks to both historical realities and future aspirations.

Keywords: Education, Philosophy, National Renaissance.

Introduction

Education, a cornerstone of any nation's progress, paradoxically finds itself in a state of perpetual crisis within Nigeria. Despite its wealth of human and material resources, Nigeria grapples with a conundrum. While striving for modernity, its educational framework seems to be fostering a culture of sub-par standards, unemployment, unrest, and disillusionment. This decline, manifested through continuous industrial

actions by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the deplorable conditions of primary and secondary school infrastructure, really highlights some deep-seated problems within Nigeria's political landscape. Education, which ought to be dedicated to imparting values and fostering civic-mindedness, has seemingly become a means for personal gain, the mere accumulation of certificates, and political manoeuvrings.

This paper delves into the intricate relationship between education and national resurgence, employing philosophical analysis and interpretive methods. It thoroughly examines the structural deficiencies plaguing the Nigerian education system and assesses their consequences for the country's development. It also views education as a cultural, ethical, and political undertaking that is essential for igniting a renewed sense of national consciousness. By scrutinizing the issue through the lenses of African philosophy and global educational theories, this paper argues that the crisis in Nigerian education is fundamentally a crisis of values. True national renewal, it suggests, is only possible when education is philosophically re-imagined as a means of cultivating justice, cooperation, and the overall well-being of the populace.

The relevance of this paper is heightened by the current circumstances. As reported by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Nigeria has the unfortunate distinction of having the highest number of out-of-school children globally, with over 20 million.¹ The World Bank further reports that 70 percent of Nigerian children in primary schools suffer “learning poverty,” this means they cannot read and understand a simple text by age ten.² These statistics describe administrative failure, and they represent a national tragedy that undermines any aspiration for renaissance. The challenge, therefore, is not simply to expand access, but to ask philosophically: What kind of education can awaken the Nigerian nation to its destiny?

The paper proceeds by offering a historical hindsight into Nigerian education, examining its colonial foundations and postcolonial reforms, before analyzing

contemporary crises. It then interprets education hermeneutically as a cultural and ethical practice, and finally proposes directions for a renaissance that is value-laden, contextually grounded, and philosophically attuned.

Historical Context of Nigerian Education

The crisis of Nigerian education is better understood by recourse to its historical foundations. Colonial education, introduced by Christian missionaries and later formalized by the British Colonial Government, was not designed for national renaissance but for administrative convenience. It produced clerks, interpreters, and catechists, not innovators or critical thinkers. As Walter Rodney bluntly observed, “colonial education was education for subordination, exploitation, and the creation of mental confusion and the development of underdevelopment.”³ This legacy has proven stubbornly resilient, even after independence in 1960.

Nigeria's post-independence leaders sought to reform this colonial inheritance. The Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme launched in 1976 under Olusegun Obasanjo promised free and compulsory education for all children. While noble in intent, the programme collapsed under the weight of inadequate funding, poor planning, and corruption. By the 1980s, Nigeria faced a new wave of educational decline, exacerbated by military dictatorship, economic recession, and structural adjustment policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund. Achebe's famous observation resonates here:

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian land, climate, water,

¹ UNESCO Institute for Statistics, *Education Data Release* (Paris: UNESCO, 2023).

² World Bank, *Learning Poverty in Nigeria* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2023).

³ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1972): 263.

air, or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example, which is the hallmark of true leadership.⁴

Achebe's indictment of leadership is mirrored in education. Despite numerous commissions and White Papers, Nigeria's policies have been inconsistent, often abandoned with each change of government. The 1977 National Policy on Education has undergone multiple revisions, yet its lofty goals — to create "a free and democratic society" and "a just and egalitarian society" — remain unrealized. The result is an educational system trapped in perpetual experimentation.

The return to civilian rule in 1999 brought renewed optimism. The Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme sought to correct the failures of UPE by guaranteeing nine years of free education. However, two decades later, UNESCO and UNICEF data show Nigeria still has the largest population of out-of-school children globally.⁵ The inability to implement UBE reflects not only financial limitations but also the deeper philosophical problem of what education means for the Nigerian elite. Instead of a social contract binding State and citizenry, education has been *commodified*, privatized, and often left at the mercy of market forces.

A historical overview also reveals the persistence of inequality. Missionary schools in southern Nigeria flourished in the colonial era, while northern Nigeria was left behind due to the colonial policy of indirect rule, which preserved traditional emirate structures. This regional disparity persists today, with northern Nigeria recording the

highest rates of illiteracy, child marriage, and educational exclusion. The Boko Haram insurgency, whose very name means "Western education is forbidden," thrives in this context of educational neglect and alienation. As Paulo Freire reminds us:

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.⁶

Nigeria's educational history demonstrates that for too long it has functioned in the first sense — as an instrument of conformity, political patronage, and social stratification — rather than as a practice of freedom and national transformation.

Philosophical Foundations of Education

At its core, education transcends the mere transfer of information. It involves nurturing values, fostering civic responsibility, and preparing individuals for active and meaningful involvement in their communities. In Nigeria, the foundational philosophy of education has wavered between Western utilitarian perspectives and indigenous communal values. Consequently, the challenges facing education stem not just from inadequate funding or poor facilities but from a deeper confusion regarding its fundamental purpose.

Plato famously stated in his *Republic* that "the direction in which education starts a man will determine his future life."⁷

⁴ Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1983): 1.

⁵ UNICEF, *Nigeria Education Fact Sheet* (Abuja: UNICEF Nigeria, 2023).

⁶ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970): 34.

⁷ Plato, *Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee (London: Penguin, 1987): 167.

Education is inherently biased towards certain values and significantly influences the destinies of nations. This crucial understanding has often been overlooked in Nigeria. The country inherited a British educational system focused on creating civil servants and administrators rather than fostering creative thinkers or problem-solvers. This approach has entrenched a certificate-oriented model, reducing education to a mere qualification rather than a transformative vehicle for nation-building.

A. B. Fafunwa, in his seminal work *History of Education in Nigeria*, noted that colonial education had a dual nature: it increased literacy but failed to develop critical thinking or technical skills. He pointed out that:

The kind of education introduced into Nigeria by the British was not designed to promote national development. It was rather meant to produce interpreters, clerks, teachers, and low-level administrators who would help in the administration of the colony. Consequently, the curriculum was bookish, literary and geared towards white-collar jobs.⁸

Fafunwa's critique highlights a persistent philosophical misalignment plaguing Nigeria's education system. The education system failed to reflect local needs or aspirations. This has created disconnect between education and the realities of life. Here, African philosophical thought offers a corrective perspective. Julius Nyerere's concept of 'Education for Self-Reliance' proffered that African education should be rooted in communal values, productive

work, and social solidarity. He argued that "education should not divorce people from their society but enable them to live better within it and transform it."⁹ In contrast, the system of education in Nigeria has often alienated individuals from productive engagement, thus leading graduates to view white-collar positions as the sole route to success while overlooking sectors like agriculture and technology.

Kwame Anthony Appiah, reflecting on identity and values, asserts that education must go beyond utilitarian training to cultivate ethical responsibility. He stated, "If we are to take identity seriously, then education must address the moral frameworks by which people live, not just the skills they acquire."¹⁰ For Nigeria, this means education should provide both technical skills and a foundation in values like justice, integrity, and civic duty. The absence of such a value-cantered approach explains the pervasive deep-seated corruption within the educational system. From examination fraud to the practice of bribing lecturers for grades, Nigerian schools reflect the corruption that afflicts broader society. Instead of rectifying societal flaws, education reinforces them. Wole Soyinka cautioned that "the greatest threat to freedom is the absence of critical thinking."¹¹ By neglecting philosophy and the humanities, Nigerian education undermines the critical thinking necessary for a societal renaissance.

Contemporary Nigerian Realities

The current state of Nigerian education reveals a troubling scenario of decline and disillusionment. From primary to tertiary institutions, the signs of crisis are unmistakable. Over the past two decades,

⁸ A. Babs Fafunwa, *History of Education in Nigeria* (Ibadan: NPS Educational, 1974): 72.

⁹ Julius K. Nyerere, *Education for Self-Reliance* (Dar es Salaam: Government Printer, 1967): 12.

¹⁰ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005): 23.

¹¹ Wole Soyinka, *The Open Sore of a Continent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996): 15.

public universities have faced extensive closures, due to ASUU strikes caused by underfunding, poor working conditions, and infrastructure.¹² Students caught in this cycle experience disruptions that negatively impact both their academic performance and mental well-being. As reported by UNESCO, more than 70 percent of Nigerian schools lack essential facilities, including libraries, laboratories, and sufficient classrooms.¹³ Teachers are often underpaid, demoralized, and sometimes compelled to take on multiple jobs in order to survive. This leads to a decline in the quality of instruction and an increase in brain drain, as skilled educators leave the country in search of better opportunities.

The crisis is not only structural but also moral. Ademola noted that “education is key to moral rebirth, but when the institutions of learning themselves become corrupt, society loses its compass.”¹⁴ This is evident in rampant examination malpractice, cult activities in universities, and the commercialization of degrees in “miracle centres.” Rather than instilling civic virtues, Nigerian education has turned into a marketplace where success is often disconnected from merit.

Security issues further exacerbate this crisis. The abduction of 276 schoolgirls in Chibok in 2014, the kidnapping of Dapchi girls in 2018, and numerous attacks on schoolchildren in Kaduna and Zamfara between 2021 and 2023 illustrate the increasing danger in Nigerian schools.¹⁵ The phrase, “safe schools,” has entered policy discussions, thus underscoring the grim reality that education is under threat. Boko Haram’s ideological opposition to Western

education both reflects and contributes to the educational collapse in Nigeria.

Economic factors intensify the situation. The World Bank reports that youth unemployment in Nigeria reached 33 percent in 2023, with many graduates struggling to find meaningful work.¹⁶ The disconnection between universities and industries results in degrees that do not lead to jobs, while businesses lament the lack of skilled workers. This dissonance diminishes faith in education as a means of social mobility, causing growing apathy among students and parents. The moral and social implications are severe. The rising trend of “japa” — the mass migration of Nigerian youths to Europe, North America, and Asia — indicates a loss of faith in the nation’s future. Instead of inspiring a national renaissance, the education system fosters disillusionment and a desire to leave. As Freire warned, “when education fails to be liberatory, the dream of liberation fades and the oppressed resign themselves to domination.”¹⁷ Nigeria faces such resignation unless it redefines what education truly means.

Education as a Tool for Individual Advancement versus National Rebirth

A significant contradiction within Nigerian education is that while it offers opportunities for individual advancement, it has not fostered a collective renaissance for the country. Education is commonly viewed as a means for personal growth, providing access to better employment, enhanced social standing, and political power. Parents often make considerable sacrifices to ensure their children receive an education, believing that

¹² Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), *Strike Records Report* (Abuja: ASUU Secretariat, 2022).

¹³ UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report: Nigeria* (Paris: UNESCO, 2022).

¹⁴ Ademola Jegede, *Ethics and Education in Africa* (Ibadan: Spectrum, 2019): 47.

¹⁵ Amnesty International, *Nigeria: Abductions and Insecurity in Schools* (London: Amnesty International, 2023).

¹⁶ World Bank, *Nigeria Development Update: Employment and Education* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2023).

¹⁷ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 42.

a degree will lead to jobs and elevate their family's status. Unfortunately, this pragmatic view has turned education into a commercial endeavour.

As J. F. Ade Ajayi pointed out, Nigerian education has become overly focused on obtaining certificates, prioritizing formal qualifications over true learning and character development.¹⁸ The current obsession with credentials is reflected in the large number of both public and private tertiary institutions that often care more about student enrolment and financial gain rather than academic quality. This has led to a phenomenon known as "credential inflation," where the accumulation of degrees diminishes their worth in the job market.

Achebe observed that "one of the truest tests of integrity is its blunt refusal to be compromised."¹⁹ However, compromise is pervasive in Nigerian education, evident in practices such as "miracle examination centres" where students pay for grades and nepotism in admissions and job placements. This perception of education as merely a pathway to employment undermines its essential role in fostering values and civic duty. Ali Mazrui sharply criticized this utilitarian view of Education as only useful in securing employment by reflecting on the colonial education legacy in Africa:

The colonial school system taught Africans how to be clerks and interpreters, but rarely how to be creators or innovators. It offered literacy but not liberation; certificates but not skills; status but not solidarity. In the end, it produced Africans who were strangers to their own culture and unprepared for the

challenges of nation-building. Independence, therefore, found us literate but not liberated, schooled but not educated, employable but not empowered.²⁰

Mazrui's critique remains alarmingly relevant in Nigeria, where many graduates leave universities with inadequate technical skills, limited entrepreneurial abilities, and poor sense of civic obligation. The emphasis on education as a means of achieving social mobility caters to individual goals while leaving the nation as a whole disadvantaged. The real challenge is philosophical: to reconceptualise education as not just a means for personal success but as a transformative process for society. Only by doing so can education rise above utilitarianism and become a catalyst for national rebirth.

The Significance of Education: An Examination

Analysis reveals systemic flaws in Nigerian education. A hermeneutical approach invites us to explore what education truly symbolizes as a cultural, ethical and political undertaking. Education encompasses not just the content but also its significance within the collective mindset of a society. To ponder education in Nigeria, hermeneutically, is to inquire: What does it mean to be educated here?

In traditional African societies, education was comprehensive, integrating moral development, community responsibility, and practical skills. Kwasi Wiredu emphasized that "traditional African education was characteristically functional, aiming to prepare the individual for life as a

¹⁸ J. F. Ade Ajayi, *Paths to the Past: Essays in the Historiography and Historical Culture of Nigeria* (Ibadan: University Press, 1990): 214.

¹⁹ Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, 10.

²⁰ Ali A. Mazrui, *Cultural Forces in World Politics* (London: James Currey, 1990): 145.

whole – intellectually, morally, socially, and economically – in service of the community.”²¹ In contrast, contemporary Nigerian education has become disjointed, focusing on intellectual knowledge while neglecting moral and civic education.

From a hermeneutical perspective, the current educational crisis reflects a more profound cultural disconnection. Education has become detached from Nigeria's socio-economic realities, leading to the graduation of individuals lacking skills and a sense of values. Consequently, there exist privileged educated elites that often perceive itself as superior to the broader population, exacerbating the divide between the educated and the uneducated. This contradicts the idea of a renaissance, which ideally involves collective renewal rather than just elite ascent.

Nyerere's concept of Education for Self-Reliance offers a valuable hermeneutical lens. He argued that education should cultivate not only cognitive abilities but also a commitment to service, community, and self-reliance. He stated, “The education we provide must encourage cooperation, not individualism. It must stress community responsibility rather than individual advancement.”²² Applied to Nigeria, this suggests an educational system that connects urban and rural experiences, elites and ordinary people, theory and practice.

The hermeneutical challenge is also ethical. Nigeria's civic issues—from electoral fraud to corruption—underscore the education system's failure to impart shared values. As Appiah noted, “ethics and identity are inseparable; the way we teach the young to see themselves is the way they will see their obligations to others.”²³ A hermeneutical re-evaluation of education, therefore, necessitates not just curriculum

changes but also the development of new narratives surrounding Nigerian identity, solidarity, and citizenship. In this more profound context, education transforms into not just preparation for the workforce but also an initiation into the moral and political community. This vision has the potential to inspire Nigeria towards its own renaissance.

Findings and Comparative Insights

The analysis reveals several key insights. Firstly, Nigeria's educational crisis is not solely due to a lack of infrastructure or funding; it stems from a deeper philosophical issue regarding its orientation. Education is perceived more as a means for individual success rather than a pathway for collective improvement. The colonial legacy of prioritizing utility and certification has been maintained, perpetuating the very issues it was intended to address. Secondly, the Nigerian government has repeatedly failed to ensure consistent educational policies. Initiatives like the Universal Primary Education in the 1970s and Universal Basic Education in the late 1990s have been compromised by corruption, ineffective execution, and a lack of ongoing vision. This aligns with Achebe's enduring observation that “the trouble with Nigeria is a failure of leadership.”²⁴

Thirdly, insecurity represents a new dimension of the educational crisis. Attacks on schools by Boko Haram and bandits highlight the government's failure to safeguard its most vulnerable citizens. Progress in education is impossible when schools are unsafe and the legitimacy of education is undermined. By looking to other regions for inspiration, we can draw useful lessons. In South Africa, the philosophy of *Ubuntu* has shaped educational reforms post-apartheid;

²¹ Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996): 23.

²² Nyerere, *Education for Self-Reliance*, 18.

²³ Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*, 45.

²⁴ Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, 1.

emphasizing that one's identity is rooted in community relationships. This communal perspective fosters both solidarity and moral development alongside academic achievement. Similarly, East Asian Confucian traditions have instilled values of respect for learning, discipline, and civic duty, aiding in swift modernization. Nigeria must find a way to base its education on local values while incorporating effective practices from around the world. As P. Freire pointed out:

Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information. It is a learning situation in which the learner assumes the role of a subject in the quest to unveil reality, while critically analyzing it and thereby transforming it. Without such critical consciousness, education is domestication, not liberation.²⁵

Freire's words remind us that unless Nigeria reforms its education to awaken critical consciousness, the system will remain a mechanism of domestication, producing conformity rather than creativity.

Towards a National Renaissance

The pursuit of a national renewal in Nigeria should start with a redefinition of education. To address the existing decline, education needs to be viewed as a means to secure employment and a way to foster values, civic duty, and a sense of community. An education system focused on renaissance should be:

- (a). Value-driven: Education should actively promote ethics, integrity, and civic duty. Core subjects like philosophy, history, and literature should be emphasized in curricula to ensure students are not only proficient but also morally sound.
- (b). Culturally relevant: Education must align with Nigeria's cultural and socio-economic contexts. It should incorporate agricultural training, vocational skills, and technology alongside traditional knowledge.
- (c). Philosophically engaging: Education should challenge students to reflect on essential issues like justice, solidarity, and personal growth. As Appiah pointed out, the concepts of identity and ethics are intricately linked to education.²⁶

Nyerere's insights are particularly pertinent here. He noted in his writings about education that African schools frequently distanced students from their communities instead of preparing them to contribute meaningfully. He lamented and contended that:

Too often, our schools have trained young people to look down upon the kind of life their parents live — a life of farming, fishing, and communal solidarity. Education has, in effect, encouraged them to flee from their communities in search of white-collar employment. What Africa needs is an education which roots the

²⁵ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 68.

²⁶ Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*, 67.

young in their culture, equips them with practical skills, and instils in them a sense of service to the people.²⁷

For Nigeria, this implies shifting the education system away from elitism and a fixation on certificates, aiming instead for practical, community-based learning. This approach is the key to achieving a true national renaissance.

Conclusion

The crisis in Nigerian education reflects the country's larger moral and political issues. At its foundation is a philosophical gap: a lack of clarity regarding the purpose of education. By prioritizing credentials over character, social advancement over unity and conformity over critical thinking, Nigerian education has strayed from its true mission. However, there is still hope for renewal. If education is re-imagined as a cultural, ethical, and political endeavour that promotes justice, solidarity, and human development, Nigeria can reclaim its progress. History, the thoughts of African philosophers, and the realities of current global challenges all point to one undeniable fact: without a transformation in education, a national renaissance will not be achieved.

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²⁷ Julius K. Nyerere, *Education Never Ends* (Dar es Salaam: Government Printer, 1973): 32.

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