

EDUCATION IN KNOWLEDGE AND EXERCISE OF POLITICAL POWER FOR SOCIAL RECONSTRUCTION: THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

This paper investigated education in knowledge and exercise of political power for social reconstruction in the Nigerian context. The aim of the paper was to underscore the urgent need for social reconstruction in Nigeria through education, knowledge and exercise of political power as key factors. The investigation was a qualitative one. A philosophical method was adopted, in which concepts and terms were critically examined, clarified and related to social reconstruction. Related literatures were also taken into consideration. From these, the paper observed that Nigerian political office holders have not been fair in their exercise of power. Some of the reasons for this include selfishness, lack of political will, ethnic and religious bias, and pervasive corruption. These, in turn, are attributable to improper education, both in principle and practice, but more especially in practice. The ugly situation has rendered social reconstruction merely a wishful thinking in the minds of the patriotic few. It was the conclusion of the paper that proper education in the knowledge and exercise of political power is indispensable for Nigeria to achieve social reconstruction, since education arms people with relevant knowledge, skills and competences. Without social reconstruction there can be no meaningful development. It was then suggested that Nigerian educators and educational institutions should brace up to face the challenges in this direction. Also, political office holders and those aspiring to positions of power, authority and influence should avail themselves any given opportunity to be well educated in these regards.

Keywords: Education, Knowledge, Political Power, Nigeria, Social Reconstruction.

Introduction

Education and political power are deemed fitting and acceptable as systems that can effectively serve as change agents in the process of social reconstruction. While education imparts knowledge, skills, attitudes and competencies for social progress and stability, it is the political power that controls and directs their implementation, and shapes the environment in which education operates. Nigeria is a nation with diverse challenges, which invariably arise from unjust social systems, particularly since after the civil war (1967-1970). Such challenges include poor economy, political instability, violent conflicts bordering on religion and ethnicity, alleged marginalization of some sections of the country, and insecurity. With a plethora of problems as these, it is obvious that Nigeria needs social reconstruction. To address these challenges efficiently and effectively is to engage in social reconstruction, and education and political power are of vital importance in this regard. Social reconstruction is a striving to attain justice and equity in the society by effecting positive changes in the various social systems on which society is based (Zacko-Smith, 2018).

People, especially those in political leadership, need education in the proper knowledge and exercise of political power so as to be able to meaningfully engage in social reconstruction. With the requisite knowledge and proper use of political power, Nigeria can achieve a level of tolerance, peaceful coexistence and social cohesion through acceptance of a national identity that transcends individual, ethnic and religious differences. In such a condition, there will be mechanisms and social institutions that cut across divisions and capable of addressing the ills of past abuses of political power and resolving disputes non-violently. For the well-being of the Nigerian society, social reconstruction is an urgent need. The achievement of this depends heavily on the level of the people's education, knowledge and use of political power, as key factors.

This paper, therefore, is an attempt to explore the significance of these key factors in relation to social reconstruction in Nigerian context. A qualitative philosophical method of conceptual framework and analysis, explication and critical examination of relevant literature is adopted. Major points of attention and consideration in this regard are education, knowledge, political power, and social reconstruction. This will lead to a discussion of the role of education in social reconstruction, and social reconstruction in Nigerian context. The outcome of the discussion will inform the conclusion to be drawn, and suggestions for sustained efforts at social reconstruction in Nigeria.

Education

Education is a word with a wide range of meanings. This is because it is usually approached, explained and evaluated from various perspectives, such as philosophical, sociological, psychological, cultural, political, and many more. For Okafor (2006:17), the term education "embraces all those experiences of the individual, through which knowledge is acquired, the intellect enlightened, and the will strengthened". This definition is undoubtedly coming from philosophical perspective, hence the emphasis on knowledge, intellect and will. From sociological viewpoint, Otite and Ogionwo (2006) hold that education refers to the acquisition of required knowledge and skills for adaptation to, and exploitation of, the social and physical environment in the process of development. According to Onwuka (2011:4), "Education is the process of not only teaching the culture (way of life) of the people but also that of preserving and upgrading it so as to improve the welfare of man". Going back to Plato's view as related by Rusk (1965:30), education "makes a man eagerly pursue the ideal perfection of citizenship, and teaches him how rightly to rule and how to obey". Plato's idea of education can be said to be political in orientation and direction, since his aim is to have an ideal state with perfect citizens.

One can go on and on in exploring the conceptualization of education from various perspectives. However, all the perspectives can be seen to have a point of convergence on the individual and the society. In the context of this paper, philosophical and political perspectives are highly favoured. To this end, education is a process of acquiring knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and competencies, within and outside the formal school system, and their proper exercise (application) for a better ordering and transformation of the individual and society. In other words, education is a process of empowering the individuals through the acquisition of knowledge and other prerequisites in order to contribute to the progress and stability of the society.

Knowledge

The definition of knowledge has been a problematic one, starting from the time of the ancient philosophers down to the present era. Philosophically, the study of knowledge is called epistemology. According to Hunt (2003:100), "Knowledge is often defined as a belief that is true and justified". Knowledge can be theoretical (as with an assumed understanding of a subject), or practical (as with functional skills and creative arts). It can again be implicit, in which case it exists at the knower's unconscious zone (Bolisani and Bratianu, 2018) - not manifest, not specific or detailed, but remains the essential part of the known; or it can be explicit - showing clarifications, specifications and details about the known, especially through experience and education. So, knowledge can be more or less formal and systematic. To have knowledge is to have power. In fact, that knowledge is power is a popular dictum in philosophy, attributed to Francis Bacon (1561-1626). Knowledge is very essential in life, and it is always knowledge of or about something.

For the social reconstructionists, knowledge is viewed as being interdisciplinary, not simply in terms of intellectual quality. Knowledge, for them, is cognitive, experiential and social, such that knowledge gained by the society becomes a major focus of attention beyond the personal characteristics, thus bringing the subjective reality of both the individual and society into play. In this understanding, knowledge is not only information about something, but also experience with something. It is for this reason that the social reconstructionists see the school as a meeting point of culture, power and knowledge to birth a vision of the future that determines what true, ethical, emancipatory and worthwhile knowledge should consist in (Giroux, 2006). The way the school teaches ethical and political dimensions of knowledge is of great importance to social reconstructionists. This is because they are of the view that knowledge and value are interconnected.

In the society, there are always social, cultural, political and economic interactions, out of which arise discourses that determine what counts as true, important and relevant (McLaren, 2007). In the context of social reconstruction, academic and intellectual skills are of little worth if they are not employed as tools for the analysis and reconstruction of the society. Among things the knowledge of which are highly sought, political power is apparently one of the most elusive, shrouded, as it is, in some sorts of subtleties. Yet, knowledge of political power and its proper use is indispensable for any nation to progress, insofar as politics is concerned with the running of government, which is saddled with the responsibility of making and implementing policies that drive the society.

Political Power

It is difficult to get at a precise definition or conceptualization of the term power. This is because it is dynamic, both in meaning and application. However, it has been variously defined as the ability to produce an effect, the capacity for being acted upon or undergoing an effect, legal or official authority, capacity or right, possession of control, authority or influence over others, political control or influence (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2020). These definitions imply that power, from whatever perspective it is looked at, has to do with the control and management of resources, both human and material, in accordance with the will of the possessor. It can be understood as the ability of human agency to exercise control over its social and physical environment. Power exists in all relationships and institutions as part of the way society and culture operate. Power operates both through formal institutions and

rules and through informal relationships and cultural norms. Power can take many forms, operate in different spheres, and understood in different ways, such as political power, spiritual power, economic power, military power, and many more. For the purpose of this paper, further attention will be given to political power.

Political power refers to the ability of those in government to direct, control or influence the behaviours of the citizens as well as the course of events for the sake of the common good. Political power is an authority held by a group within a society that allows for the administration of public resources and implementation of policies for the society (Business Dictionary, 2020). This sense of political power is amenable to representative democracy, where power is exercised on behalf of the people by those elected to represent them in the government, whether in the national, state or local government level. It is in this context of democracy that political power is understood and discussed here. The one or group that has political power can make rules and regulations, policies and acts that can have far reaching effects (positive or negative) on the lives of the citizens. In this sense, it is the ability to control the behaviour of the people through the passage, approval and implementation of laws and regulations. Those who possess political power are therefore entrusted with the right and responsibility to make policies and decisions on how things are to be in the society.

Possession and exercise of political power usually exists in a social setting, where control is exercised in relation to persons, institutions or state through policy makings and implementations. This control may be exercised by the use of force, economic means, or control over knowledge and information. Each of these is important when considering knowledge and exercise of power for social reconstruction. How one perceives and exercises power depends a lot on one's educational frames of reference. The same thing goes with the methods and strategies adopted in doing so.

In everyday life, language, institutions and relationships are affected by political power and the way it is exercised. The effects of political power are not just felt in the instances of its abuse, but also in the very fabric of people's lives, how issues are framed, and how decisions and policies are made and implemented. Its effects can also be discerned in the ways particular kinds of people, groups or ethnicities within the polity are either valued and integrated or considered inconsequential and marginalized, and the extent to which people regard themselves as capable of shaping their own destinies. It is the expectation in every society that the exercise of political power be marked with transparency and accountability. Where the contrary is the case, political power can be adjudged as evil or unjust.

Political power is fundamentally designed to be good, as something inherited or given, to be exercised for the purpose of achieving desirable objectives and creating conditions that will help move and empower the citizens to pursue the common good of all and the progress of the society. The use of power need not involve force, threat or coercion. An example of using power without coercion is the concept of 'soft power' as compared to 'hard power'. According to Wilson (2008:144), "Soft power is the capacity to persuade others to do what one wants". This persuasive power is based on attraction and emulation, and it is "associated with intangible resources such as culture, ideology and institutions" (Nye, 2009:63). Hard power, on the other hand, is based on military might, coercion and economic sanctions. This is power by use of force, and it counts on tangible resources such as armed forces, or economic means

(Gallarotti, 2011). Power usually changes those in position of power and those who are the targets of power. Exercise of power often evokes reactions among social groups, depending on the dimensions in which the power is wielded.

Social Reconstruction

Social reconstruction is a process of bringing positive changes in the society through ethical and political dimensions of knowledge. It is a strategy for ameliorating crises in the society. According to Esmaili (2015), social reconstruction is a philosophy that focuses on achieving social changes. He further explains that in practice, it strives to achieve social justice equality by working for the alteration of various social systems upon which the society rests and operates. It is based on two major existential social facts. The first is that the society tends to produce and sustain systems that marginalize and oppress some individuals or groups within the society. In social reconstruction, ideologies that tend to perpetrate and perpetuate marginalization and oppression need to be changed. The second fact is the need for stable and sustainable systems that serve as change agents and open to changing their own purposes and structures as the social contexts in which they exist naturally evolve and require.

Philosophers and educators who promote the social reconstruction ideology view curriculum from a social perspective. According to Gutek (2011), the social reconstructionists are inspired by Dewey's emphasis on social reconstruction, and they strongly believe in the rebuilding of socio-cultural experiences. Dewey (1944) envisions the feasibility of social reconstruction through democratic education. He believes that the school is capable of educating citizens to be better, and so be able to solve moral, social and political problems. Social reconstructionists first assume that our society is unhealthy indeed, and that its very survival is threatened because the traditional mechanisms developed by the society to contend with social problems are incapable of doing their job. Second, they believe that something can be done to save the society from chaos. This assumption necessitates the development of a vision of a society better than the existing one, a society whose problems and conflicts are tackled through non-violent means, mutual respect, understanding, justice and fairness.

Finally, social reconstruction philosophers and educators believe that education can provide the means of reconstructing the society. They have faith in the ability of education, through the medium of curriculum, to equip people with relevant knowledge, skills and competencies to critically analyze themselves in relation to their society, understand the ills of their society, develop a vision of a better world based on conception of social justice, and actualize the vision. This means that social reconstruction is practical in its orientation, anchored, as it is, on the philosophy of pragmatism (Gutek, 2011).

Among the problems that threaten the survival of the society are racism, war, sexism, poverty, environmental pollution, work exploitation, global warming, crime, corruption, population explosion, energy shortage, illiteracy, inadequate health care, and unemployment. Underlying many of these problems are deep social structures often rooted in Eurocentric conceptions of knowledge, culture and values which, through the curriculum, subtly shape students' beliefs and behaviours in such a way that they, both as students and later as adults in the wider society, will invariably contribute to the continuation and even worsening of these problems.

Social reconstruction is rooted in renewal and modernization which are essential and natural characteristics of human beings (Esmaili, 2015). These renewal and modernization bring about human development. Developmental strategies, therefore, need to be reconstructed to harness our natural resources, human and material capitals. These are largely determined to a significant degree by the knowledge and understanding of the citizens. Adewole (2000) suggests that unless the individual is capable of exploring and mastering fresh frontiers of knowledge and skills, he becomes incapable of surviving.

Since “education should be treated as the most important investment in the future” (Zgaga, 2005), it means that education has strategic roles to play in social reconstruction. In this regard, Burns (1955) had earlier argued that the function of education must involve giving direction to social reconstruction, for social reconstruction is acutely needed if social problems are to be solved and social ideals realized.

The Role of Education in Social Reconstruction

Social reconstructionists usually dedicate themselves to the reconstruction of the society. Their approach consists of analyzing and understanding the society, envisioning an improved society, and acting to transform the existing society into a better one, in line with their vision. This approach can be worked into the school curricula, taking into account the values and needs of the society. School then becomes the social institution through which knowledge is imparted, future leaders nurtured in the use of power, and action initiated for the reconstruction of the society.

For social reconstruction to be successful, people have to be ready for some changes in the society. According to Esmaili (2015), the creation of readiness has to be started and organized by educational institutions, and so social reconstruction should be one of the ultimate goals of educational institutions, including universities. Thus, education has the role of preparing people to transform the society. Proponents of social reconstruction believe that the school, as a social institution, can successfully inspire and persuade learners to work for a better society through the acquisition of skills and knowledge, especially knowledge of the society (Gutek, 2011). To achieve this, educators should deliberately reach out for the formulation of the type of curricula and procedures of education that are capable of positively influencing social attitudes, ideas and behaviours of both the present and coming generations (Count, 1932b). By so doing they will be able to bring about social reconstruction.

Social reconstruction requires that educators assume new roles and functions of critiquing and analyzing the society and its events. At the present they seem to be simply following social consensus, trends and pressures, rather than being dynamic and critical intellectual leaders who can positively influence and mold social values, beliefs and practices. This means that:

Schools must face squarely and courageously every social issue, come to grips with life in all of its stark reality, establish an organic relation with the community, develop a realistic and comprehensive theory of welfare, fashion a compelling and challenging vision of human destiny, and become somewhat less frightened than they are today of the bogeys of imposition and indoctrination (Counts, 1932b:259).

For the above task to be accomplished, the conception of education as transmitters of established knowledge and social values must be re-examined so that education can be aligned with a vision of the future rooted in concepts of social justice, fairness and human empowerment. In this way it will be able to prepare students to live in and transform the current society into the envisioned better future. Education is therefore to be seen as a catalyst that stimulates the reconstruction of the society.

Education takes place through many channels, including the family, community and school. Social reconstructionists want education to inform and influence the knowledge and use of power in all of these channels. This means that education is not limited to the formal school programmes where professional teachers and educators focus their endeavours, but can also take place informally in the family, community, factory, in the park, and elsewhere. However, the reconstructionists believe that it is the job of educators to set the ball rolling within the school system. "If the schools are to be really effective, they must be centres for the building and not merely for the contemplation of our civilization" (Counts, 1932b:37).

Social Reconstruction in Nigerian Context

Nigeria cannot be indifferent to global affairs. Surely, global competition and striving for social emancipation and progress through social reconstruction have great impacts on all the citizens of the world, irrespective of nationalities. The striving and competition demand higher quality, critical thinking and problem solving capabilities, both at the individual and group levels. There is, therefore, the palpable need to see social reconstruction as an end, and knowledge as a means to attain that end. In point of fact, these ingenious potentials have to be fostered today in Nigeria to enable its citizens apply their skills to the reconstruction of the Nigerian society, especially now that people can have access to all kinds of knowledge, not only through formal education system, but through satellite and internet sources as well. This agrees with the view expressed by Brameld (1965:93) that "the realization of the capacity of the self to measure up to its fullest, most satisfying powers in cooperative relationship with other selves is the capstone of reconstructionist theory and practice".

The emerging scenario is a perspective that calls for human resource development that will result in a shift in curriculum design, physical facilities, methodology, instructional materials, technology and even administration of schools, in order to measure up to the requirements of social reconstruction. Social reconstruction aims at progress in all facets of social life. This will affect all fields of human endeavours and apply to their different disciplines. Enoch (2003) posits that right before the strong wind of globalization, economists of education have postulated a perfect link between education and knowledge-driven globalization, with multinational companies dictating the pace. Nigeria has become dependent on them. So, for Nigerian society to be relevant to the global scheme of things, it must be restructured to meet the present as well as future demands in tune with global expectations and practices.

Currently in Nigeria, there is much need for functional democracy. However, unless adequate attention is paid to human development, the people will be perpetually unable to express their individual views and actively participate in democratic activities, and sustainable participatory democracy would remain elusive to the Nigerian nation. In this case, there is need for social reconstruction in line with principles and practices that enhance human values

and common good of all. Increase in knowledge will help in rational political participation, and this will in turn enhance the growth of democracy.

The protagonists of social reconstruction are of the view that proper education of individuals can lead to social reconstruction in Nigeria. In other words, if people are well educated in the knowledge and exercise of political power, they will be able to visualize either new ways of doing the same things, or reforming the existing order to enable the development of same. According to Enu and Gimba(2018), Nigerian education planners, administrators and other institutions charged with the responsibility of designing the curriculum should be up in the task of social reconstruction, through which harmony among the ethnic divides can be attained, thereby dismantling the fear of inequality as a major source of social disharmony in Nigeria. Knowledge being an empowering value, can promote political, social, economic, cultural, religious and scientific goals of Nigeria as a nation. This is relevant to Nigeria's search for self-reliance and global recognition.

Without mincing words, politically enlightened citizens are assets to democracy. This is because the people will be both conscious of their civil duties and critical of government efforts in meeting up with its obligations, especially with regard to the security of life and property, which is fundamental to any social progress. With politically enlightened citizens and stable democracy, Nigeria will be able to embark on meaningful social reconstruction. Nigeria has not been having it good since the end of the civil war (1967-1970). The country has moved from one problem to another, giving room for fear it may eventually crumble and cease to exist. It is in this context that Yagboyaju and Akinola (2019) opine that the Nigerian nation is standing between manifesting characteristics of state of collapse and state of failure. The knowledge and exercise of power that can foster the development of the capacities and step up human excellence in all the aspects of the nation's life should underscore any attempt at social reconstruction. Sustainable and functional democracy, which has become the in-thing in global political culture, may elude Nigeria if the present power structure is not reconstructed. The current abysmal political process, which has produced lots of paranoiac politicians with chronic inclination to power abuse with impunity at all levels, needs to be reassessed and reconstructed.

Nigerian political history has been one of topsy-turvy, right from her independence in 1960; needless to go into the frequent military coups which had intermittently truncated her democratic process. Since transition to democracy in 1999 till date, the impression one gets is that the Nigerian political office holders have not been democratically impressive in their exercise political power. According to Eziano (2020), Nigerian politicians pursue and acquire power to solve their own personal problems and to gain undue advantage over their opponents, and not really to make and implement policies that will have positive impacts on the lives of the citizens. In the same vein, Tella (2016) is of the view that political elites in Nigeria hardly show concern or empathy towards those they represent, despite the stark reality of security threats and economic hardships that the latter face on daily basis. This posture of selfishness by the political office holders has heightened the level of corruption, and consequently underdevelopment, in the country. The implication here is that there is a relationship between corruption and development in terms of the nature of social and moral values prevailing in the society (Edimeh, 2007).

The current situation is an indication that the moral integrity and social values of the Nigerian political office holders are in doubt. Giroux (2005) suggests that to save Nigerian society from self-destruction, a vision of a society better than the existing one has to be developed; a vision of human civilization in which social justice for all would prevail. Reconstruction of the society into the envisioned one will give rise to the extension of the principles and practices of liberty, equality, justice and freedom to the widest possible set of institutions and people. Jimba&Odanwu (2009) opine that fresh and strategic planning of the Nigerian society has to be charted, and the basis which most communities argue should be reconstructional in nature.

Conclusion

From what has been discussed in this paper, it is obvious that education is indispensable for knowledge and proper exercise of power, especially political power. In the light of the prevailing situation in Nigeria, it can be asserted, without any fear of contradiction, that Nigerian political office holders are lacking in this type of education, hence their abysmal performance and colossal failure in politics and governance. That is why social reconstruction has become virtually unachievable for the country.

A deep-rooted knowledge of the use of power would always impel those in positions of power to always eschew selfish interests and flexing of muscles, in the interest of the common good. It is the position of this paper, therefore, that for social reconstruction(which is a necessity for Nigerian society) to be achieved, political office holders have to be people who are well educated and versed in the knowledge and exercise of political power as envisioned by social reconstructionists.

Suggestions

In the light of the above conclusion, the following suggestions are of great importance:

1. Nigerian educators and educational institutions are to brace up for their roles, some of which have been enunciated in this paper.
2. Those in the echelons of power as well as those aspiring theretoshould grasp any available opportunity to educate and update themselves in the knowledge and exercise of power at all levels.

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