

# Social Mobility and Education in Nigeria: A Critical Appraisal

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## ABSTRACT

Education acts as a mechanism for upward social mobility and the key in determining the extent of mobility an individual can aspire in society thus, the correlation between education and social mobility cannot be over-emphasized and it is in the light of this background that this paper looks at conceptual clarification of pertinent issues namely- education, functions of education, Social mobility, Factors affecting social mobility, relationship between education and social mobility in Nigeria. The researchers identified that in Nigeria, education leads to upward social mobility. Although, there are other means by which individuals can move to one level or the other in the social stratum, education is the most important tool for advancement, this importance encourages and provides theoretical evidence for students as well as policy makers in stimulating social mobility. It was recommended amongst others that Government should provide employment opportunities for graduates, and that those in authority should shun nepotism and corruption In order for every individual to have equal opportunities to experience upward social mobility. Above all the paper concludes that education does not only help a person in acquiring knowledge but it is also a passport for occupational position for higher prestige. This paper therefore is beneficial to the reading populace as it highlights the importance and impact of education to social mobility.

**Keywords:** Education, Social Mobility Appraisal, Nigeria

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Study

In our contemporary society, education ensures the allocation of positions suitable to the skills of individuals. It provides an opportunity for individuals to realize their potentials and frees them from being tied down to the occupation of their forefathers. Through education, a person can achieve his own status in the society. Most adolescents spend a greater part of their lives in institutions where they receive formal education. This form of education is regarded as major agency of socialization while socialization is a continuous process in which people are subjected to its

influence before and after their school career. Education is considered as different from other forms of socialization because it involves instruction which is deliberate and conducted within formal organization set aside for that purpose and relatively standardized. Education plays an important role in the promotion of social mobility and is one of the fundamental aspects of sociology. In today's society, education has become an instrumental variable that's impacts on the position within the "social class". Budowski & Tillmann (2013) opine that through the acquiring of education the income, influence, power of an individual improves thereby allowing him to attain a

status that command a certain level of privileges. Furthermore, scholars opine that the correlation between family background and opportunity for education remains a significant factor in many nations across the globe and as such, individuals who come from rich and advantageous social classes have a bigger probability of educating themselves further than those who are from poor and less advantageous social classes and this has seen them acquire more educational qualifications (Iannelli & Paterson, 2005). Proponents have asserted that advanced educational qualifications act as a link between societal mobility and the societal background of a person (Onyido, 2016). In society, there is always a continuous effort by individuals to engage themselves in one form of activity or another socially, economically, politically and otherwise. In the process, changes occur in individual's career, job, life styles and life chances. This effort is geared towards the improvement of one's standard of living and a better way of doing things. A man with a doctorate degree works hard to become a professor and hopes to get the privileges attached to that status. Education here is required for so many reasons. These include acquiring knowledge, preparing individuals for various social roles, status, transmitting culture, source of acquiring skills which enables people to begin new tasks and do old ones more effectively. The connection that exists between education and social mobility cannot be over-emphasized.

## **2.0 Education**

Education is a very popular concept which have been defined and explained in different ways by different individuals. For the purpose of this paper, we shall take a look at few definitions. Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (1995) defines education as "a process of training and instruction especially of children and young people in schools and colleges which is designed to give knowledge and develop skills". Education is a process through which skills, cultural values and knowledge

are transferred to individuals across generations. Onyido (2009) defined education as a black box through which individuals pass and become different from what they used to be. This means that education brings about change in the individual. Ezewu in Nwana Nzewunwa (2002) defines education as all that happens to us from the day we were born to the day we die. This shows that education is a continuous process. Education gives us knowledge and knowledge is power. James Madison, the fourth president of America asserts that knowledge is power and a country that wants to be developed must equip itself with power which knowledge gives. It is the light that drives away the darkness of ignorance and enables mankind to be developed and civilized. Aminigo (2002) defines education as "a process that develops the human mind, the personality, the potentials and imparts useful and relevant skills to individuals thereby enhancing the growth of the society. It prepares the human mind to enable it cope with challenges". Education is furthermore seen as the process of learning that would enable us live as useful and acceptable members of the society. Ukeje (2002) defined education as a "process, a product and a discipline. As a process, he argued that education is the means by which we acquire the civilization of the past and are enabled both to take part in the civilization of the present and make the civilization of the future". As a product, he contends that education means change in behaviour and as a discipline, it is a body of knowledge. Okeke (2016) defines education as the specialized process of educating individuals with the sole aim of equipping them with the skills of reading, writing and calculating as well as specialized skills and interest to enable individuals contribute positively to the society.

From the foregoing, it could be seen that education helps in the socialization of individuals. It provides individuals with appropriate behaviours which conform to the values and norms of the society. Across

the world, the correlation that exists between societal mobility and education cannot be over-emphasized and it is in the light of this background that this paper did a conceptual clarification of pertinent issues namely- Education, Functions of education, Social mobility, Factors affecting social mobility, Relationship between education and social mobility and Education and social mobility in Nigeria.

### **2.1 Functions of Education**

Education is saddled with the social functions of contributing to the maintenance and continuation of the total social system. It performs conservative function, innovative, political, economic, selective and allocative functions.

**Conservative Function:** In every society, members possess certain basic skills and knowledge. For instance, learning how to count, addition and subtraction of numbers, ability to communicate in an at least one language or more. In addition, there are some aspects of culture which need to be transferred from one generation to another. A good example is the need to marry, raise family and provide for the family. On the other hand, in a world that is undergoing rapid social change due to influence of science and technology, these aspects of the culture must be retained. It is then the onus of education to ensure that society's culture is not only preserved but transmitted from generation to another.

One of the social institutions in a society is the school. The school plays a key role in providing new ideas and knowledge to its attendants as a result of the fact that it exposes them to scientific and technological advancement that are applicable in virtually all aspects of today's society. Education is expected to form a kind of bridge between what was and future needs of the society. During the colonial period, education ushered in social change as the emergence of the first set of educated elites in Nigeria brought a major change in value system that provides innovators to ensure growth in the society. It is imperative to highlight that the innovative function of education demands

that educational system leads the way and maintains a balance between what was done in the past and what is needed in the future.

**Political Function:** Political function is another vital function of education. Education contributes to the political socialization of the child through transmission of values, beliefs, ideas and patterns of behaviour pertaining to the generation, distribution and exercise of power. For instance, the use of national language as a channel of communication in official and educational circles is believed to enhance national integration which is achieved in school. In addition, the different executive positions held by students in schools constitute a way of impacting a sense of political responsibility in the individual. Such positions include senior prefect, class prefect, labour prefect etc. In the event of carrying out such responsibilities, the spirit of political leadership and participation is inculcated.

**Moral Education:** This is based on the code of conduct of behaviour of an individual within the society. It stipulates that education entails the development of learners intellectually and morally, that is expected to result in the positive transformation of the individual.

**Economic Function:** Education performs the economic function of providing manpower for the labour market. The different subjects/disciplines provided in schools at different educational levels provide unlimited opportunities and skill training for specialists. Consequently, the educational system not only supplies qualitative and quantitative manpower, it also ensures that plans are made for future needs of societal members.

The selection and allocation functions of education are closely related to the economic. It is the ability of the learners themselves that provides the yardstick for allocating and placing them to appropriate career or professional positions. The aspects of the culture that are to be transmitted are selected by education which projects them.

### **2.2 SOCIAL MOBILITY**

The term mobility represents movement, alteration and change. This change or movement can possibly be from one area to another. This change does not necessarily have any connotations of being good or bad and as such is value free. Social mobility therefore refers to the move of individuals or a person from one societal position to another as a result of a number of issues which include wealth, power and influence. In society, there is this conscious effort made by individuals in order to better lives. People engage in one form of activity or the other either politically, socially or economically. In the process, this could result to individual's change in career, job, residential area, etc. Naturally, human beings are not static. It is possible that one can ascend from one social position to another. This shift or movement is referred to as social mobility. In social mobility, the movement in the social ladder is usually initiated by a number of factors which operate in different combinations and magnitude. In all societies, the frequency and the extent to which an individual moves between social strata is one of the criteria which are used to distinguish one type of strata from another. Goldthrope (2005) highlighted that social mobility is basically the movement in the position an individual occupies within a social strata system in either upward or downward direction. Social mobility permits the moving of an individual to another social status that is not originally the one he or she was born into. The first authors who studied social mobility were V.Pareto and P.A Sorokin in 1927. According to (De Felice, 2013) social mobility was initially defined by Sorokin as the movement of persons from one societal affiliation to another, the extinction of some and the rise of the perspective that no society has a closed or completely open social class. Furthermore, Sorokin opined that no society can be the same with another with regards to the level of social movement it tolerates or discourages. Buttressing this argument Haveman & Smeeding (2006) postulates that the "speed of movement

differs from one period of time to another to another". As such, mobility occurs in societal interactions as people react to others in a dynamic series of societal roles. In United States for instance, societal mobility is rampant as a result of the continuously exploding number of women joining the workforce and the increasing number of both parties become income earners and thereby increasing the number of person seeking to acquire education. This has therefore contributed significantly to the rise in social mobility experienced by the country in recent times. As such an individual who must be mobile must have the capability of adapting to socially unaccustomed circumstances, new class, norms and values. It can thus be deduced that social mobility has remained a universal phenomenon for scholars.

### **2.3 TYPES OF SOCIAL MOBILITY**

The change of social class of a person or group of person usually comes in various methods or shapes. At a certain point in time, there would be one pattern of mobility at another point in time it would be another pattern. These various types of mobility are not exclusively occurring and overlapping may occur (Barber, 1957; Breen, 2004).

#### **2.3.1 Horizontal Mobility**

In the case of horizontal mobility, this occurs when an individual changes his/her job and as such there is no rise in the social standing of the individual. Horizontal mobility therefore can be referred to as the shift of persons from one position to another with greater or lower levels of prestige. For instance, certain occupation like Medicine, Engineering and Education can possibly enjoy equal status but in a situation where a lecturer moves from his post to another university to lecture he still occupies the same level in with the social status but has moved in terms of horizontal from one "occupational category" to another. It is the political affiliation, occupational, spiritual and regional as well as other social movement that does not cause any noticeable shift in social status vertically.

### **2.3.2 Vertical Mobility**

Vertical mobility is the type of mobility that occurs as a result of change in the financial, political and working status of a person or group of person. Putting it plainly, vertical mobility represents the movement in social position either upwards or downwards or otherwise in an ascending or descending pattern. Thus, vertical mobility refers to the circumstances that occur in the shift of an individual across one social stratum to another. For instance, in a situation where a wealthy technocrat or business man is hit by financial crises and goes into bankruptcy he transitions into a lower social status. While in another scenario, a small scale entrepreneur with excellent skills in opportunity utilization and financial management grows into a large scale entrepreneur he transitions into a higher social status from the one he earlier occupied.

### **2.3.3 Upward Mobility**

This type of mobility occurs when an individual or collection of persons are seen to move from a position of lower social strata to a position of higher social strata. For instance, in a situation when a person who belongs to a “lower caste” and position of lower social strata wins a political position as a result of an election is seen to move into a higher social strata position. Analysts assert that although the individual has acquired economic and political influence and may transition upwards, he may not be able to alter his caste (Lenski, 2013). A number of social and psychic factors impact the upward transition of individuals’ such as the emotional collapse of men and women under the stress of continuous search for achievement. In addition, in the course of this continuous search for achievement and the upward transition, the individual may sacrifice family members, friends as well as places. According to Budowski & Tillman (2013) in order for an individual to transition upwards in the social strata he must alter the manner of rationalizing things and behaviours that characterized a lot of his

previous relations and pick up the new manner of rationalizing things as well as behaviour that is associated with his new found status.

### **2.3.4 Downward Mobility**

This form of mobility is a situation that sees an individual lose or transition from his social position to a lower social position. Downward mobility therefore is the movement of people or an individual from a higher to lower status in the social ladder. When a person for instance, who occupies a position that is highly respected by the society at large is apprehended accepted bribe, committing a crime and jail bound he will transition down the social status ladder.

### **2.3.5 Intra-Generational Mobility**

This form of social class mobility occurs in the life span of an individual. In that, the individual begins his occupational career as a steward and upon acquisition of education and skills over a period of time, he becomes a professor and transitions from one social status to a higher social status. As such, he transitions up and occupies a higher social position than what he started as steward at the beginning of his occupational career.

### **2.3.6 Inter-Generational Mobility**

Inter-generational mobility is a situation that occurs when an entire generation transitions from social position to another in contrast to the generation that it preceded it. It is imperative to establish that “inter-generational mobility” may occur downward or upwards and when people of a lower class or caste for instance, provide the facilities for their kids to acquire education or training and along the line they the kids get employments that transitions them into a higher social status it can be termed as “inter-generational mobility”.

## **2.4 FACTORS THAT IMPACT SOCIAL MOBILITY**

### **Education:**

Education does not help an individual to acquire knowledge but rather it is an effective tool to attaining occupational position for higher prestige. In order to



become a doctor, lawyer, an engineer or nurse for instance an individual must acquire education and it is only when one acquires a certain level of formal education can a person aspire to occupy higher position of authority and social status.

### **Urbanization**

This enhances social mobility by removing factors that hinder and impede mobility. Urbanization offers anonymity as people are only familiar with their family and associates while providing a certain level of privacy to the social class and background of the individual.

### **Migration**

This is another factor that enhances social mobility in that as individuals move from one location to another there is the creation of opportunities for other to move into. In that, migration is experienced in places where opportunities and facilities have failed to improve, and people have sort for better places. In addition, people migrate from villages to cities as a result of the fact that urban areas have institutions of higher education and status and also opportunities for employment. For instance, the recent migration of millions of Nigerians to Canada can be attributed to this. This has therefore facilitated social mobility within Nigeria and in these cities where the individuals migrate to.

### **Achievement and Failures**

This factor refers to the uncommon or out of the ordinary expected performance which draws the attention of a general public to the capabilities of an individual. Although not all achievement results in social mobility but it affects one's status if it is remarkable or outstanding. For instance, a man who is less privileged has to go extra miles in terms of work in order to be able to acquire wealth and move upwards his social status. This is equally applicable with regards to failure as this has a downward impact on mobility.

### **Politicization**

Education, contact with the mass media of communication and exposure to individuals who are aware of their

fundamental rights has impacted social mobility. This is as a result of the fact that awareness of fundamental right and education increases the urge to belong to political parties in order to exercise their rights and force the authorities in power to accept change. These people may use agitations such as protests, walkouts to mention but a few to attain their desired objectives and as such resulting in social mobility upwards for them. Examples of these in Nigeria include; Late Gani Fawehinmi, OmoyeleSowore, Femi Falana, Festus Keyamo, FunmilayoRansome-Kuti and late Dele Giwa to mention but a few.

### **Skills and Training**

Every society creates provisions for skills and training to be provided to the younger generations. In order to be able to acquire these skills and training, the individual has to sacrifice his time and devote lots of money. In the event that the individual completes these skill acquisition and training programmes, she is eligible to higher social positions which are superior than those he/she previously occupied prior to undergoing these training. This therefore facilitates social mobility

### **Motivation**

The desire of everyone is to not only to improve on his/her way of living but also improve upon their societal stand. In an "open system" there is a greater possibility that any status can be achieved as this level of openness encourages individuals to strive to work hard and improve upon their skills in order to achieve higher social status. The lack of such motivation and effort will make the achievement of social mobility rather unfeasible on the part of the person.

### **Industrialization**

The industrial revolution led to the production in mass of products and the consequent forcing out of business for artisans. In addition, as a consequence of these period there was the creation of a new social system where individuals were classified to social status based on their abilities and training. These artisans therefore migrated to industrialized towns

and acquired new vocational skills and employment in these industries. As a result, due to experience and training in vocational skills these artisans have moved up the social ladder. Therefore it can be posited that industrialization accelerates social mobility in that, in industrialized societies, social status are achieved however in traditional societies, the social status are ascribed according to birth and family.

### **Legislation**

Legislation has been identified as one of the factors that influence social mobility. A clear instance can be seen in passing of the “Zamindari Abolition Act” in India in 1950, that saw majority of the cultivators of lands who were tenants to the Zamindar become landlord cultivators which symbolized their transition in their social status from tenant to landlord cultivators (Rao, 1963; Besley & Burgess, 2000). In addition, the provision legally for the reservation of employment and advancement for the scheduled castes and tribes has in addition aided the social mobility. Equally, the justice system by carrying out certain judgments has also facilitated social mobility. According to (Corwin, 1977) the “Hindu Marriage Act” in a number of ways has improved the status of the woman. More so, “Hindu Succession Act” gives equal privileges to daughters with respect to inheriting properties within the family. Another legalization that facilitates social mobility is the “Racial Anti-Discrimination Act” in the United States. This act has facilitated the social mobility of races such as the blacks and Asians. A good example is former President of the United State, Barrack Obama who is from the black race. In the case of Nigeria, the quota system facilitates social mobility be facilitating the mobility of less advantaged educationally states get the opportunity to acquire education.

### **Modernization**

Modernization encompasses the application of the understanding of science and modern technologies. As a result of technological advancement, individuals that

have jobs with low prestige such as scavengers leave these jobs and take up jobs that have better levels of prestige and less impact on their health. By doing this, they change their social status upwardly. In addition, the extent of technological development enables or slows down social mobility. In the sense that developing and less advanced societies stick to the old system of stratification whereas, the advanced and modern societies have paved the way for improved opportunities and competitions.

## **2.5 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EDUCATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY**

There is no doubt saying that education is an essential tool in societal development and progress, specifically, it leads to social mobility of individuals.

Education as earlier defined is any practice of transmitting culture across generation. Before the introduction of formal western education by the missionaries, there was a form of education which is the traditional education. Traditional education is also qualified to be regarded as education because it involves transmission of culture from generation to generations. It is a system of education that is indigenous to the people and community where it is given; hence it could otherwise be referred to as indigenous education. It aimed at making individual a functional member of the society, preparing individuals to conform with and meet the requirements of the society for its security and progress, becoming socially responsible, having orientation for jobs, acquiring the required leadership skills etc are all that this system of education aims at achieving in the members. There is no doubt saying that this type of education also enhanced social mobility. Taiwo (1980) categorized the content of indigenous education in three broad ways; basic education, education for occupation and economic self reliance; and education for special occupation. These forms of

education attracted different social status and reward. Those who acquired education for special occupation were highly respected and occupied higher position in the social stratum at that time.

Today, with the advent of formal western education, people have continued to move up the social ladder in the society. Education has become so important that the uneducated is fast becoming an economic liability and unproductive and has remained downward. Availability of educated and enlightened people is an absolute necessity for social and economic development all over the world. Educated people have become true central resource of today's society and the supply of such people is the true measure of its economic, its military and even its political potential. Those who first or initially acquired the formal western education were promoted to work as clerks, interpreters, stewards, lower cadre administrators and technicians and they were respected in the society. The importance of formal education was made very clear by such persons like Late Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, Edward Blyden, Kwame Nkrumah, Samuel Lewis and others. These people had learnt from first-hand experience that without education, the white man would have continued to treat us as inferior human beings. We could not have arrested and controlled political power without education. Again, we cannot participate in the economy without education. With the acquisition of education, one's income, wealth, power moves higher and with the criteria mentioned earlier, one attains a status which commands certain privilege or privileges. In industrialized society today, education is the main instrument for upward mobility and lack of education will be the principal cause of downward mobility. Also, positive relationship exists between education and job requirements. Since industries of different types are being established, it then follows that skills of different types of technology also change with time. For any society to keep in step with these changes to satisfy the industrial

needs, formal education becomes a sinequanon factor. Training needs in specific or general capacities in highly skilled jobs is usually provided by formal education. Education breeds vertical social mobility by assisting young people to move up the social ladder and increase their earning power. According to Gana (2001) education is seen to be an important avenue for bringing about social change and gaining entrance into prestigious and lucrative jobs, as such education reflects the structural inequalities in the social system. Gaining an employment or promotion is tantamount to getting more education. Hence, equipping oneself with more skills and knowledge for added opportunity for higher job employment should be organized within the educational system. It is through the nature of one's job that one's income could be assessed. More so, the totality of one's income contributes immensely to one's standard of living, hence his social status in the society. Education is highly correlated with income and occupation. It acts as a mechanism for upward social mobility and the key in determining the extent of mobility an individual can aspire in society.

## **2.6 EDUCATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN NIGERIA**

In Nigeria today, education has become a forceful factor for upward social mobility. People with little education occupy the position of unskilled labour. The higher the educational qualification, the higher the social status. The establishment of higher colleges and universities by the recommendation of the Elliot and Asquith commission of 1959 has made more Nigerians to acquire more education which in turn has made people to move up the social ladder. Today in Nigeria, we have doctors, teachers, engineers etc. This has afforded a lot of families' life chances of enjoying products and services they desire while meeting their dreams and opportunity of having a long and healthy life. Education has afforded some individuals living in the village to migrate to urban areas with modern social facilities. Historically, in the



earlier attempts in the social-economic development of Nigeria, the group to occupy high social position was the educated and few of them occupied the upper class. The Obas, Emirs and traditional rulers did not accept modern education; instead, they considered it to be for slaves and commoners. Consequently, the early beneficiaries of modern education were the commoners/rejected ones in the society such as the osus in Igbo land as well as the slaves in the Yoruba land. In the Osu which is a caste, mobility as completely out of question until the modern time when education and economic empowerment of those in the slave category or the osu system were able to move out and compete freely with the freeborn. They are now teachers, doctors, lawyers etc. There is no longer any barrier. However, in some traditional communities, children of slaves and osu still carry some stigma which inhibit easy mobility in certain areas. They may not for instance, marry the ladies of their choice because of certain discriminatory practices but generally, education and wealth appear to have levelled all social barriers in Nigeria and those who are well educated or have enough wealth can attain any status in life. In Nigeria today, there are individuals who are powerful but not educated. Some wealthy traders are illiterates although some of them admire privileges attached to being educated. A powerful but uneducated politician may use his position to acquire Honorary Doctorate degree just to enable him answer the name 'Dr'. People truly want to be seen as educated, wealthy and powerful.

Since Nigeria gained independence in 1960, education has become a major instrument for social mobility. Existing schools continue to increase in number and size with increase in access at different levels. With the introduction of Universal Primary Education and Universal Basic Education respectively, many children have found themselves in schools. As a result of rise in the population of the students many teachers undergo training regularly which in

time gets to a stage when they are no longer gainfully employed. In fact, in Nigeria today, as the number of graduates increases, other factors have been introduced by the government such as federal character, quota system, religion and nepotism emerge for the selection of people into jobs. As a result, the acquisition of degrees that would have guaranteed better paid job, accommodation and better standard of living associated with upward social mobility is not available any longer. Ethnicity and tribal affiliation as well as 'god fatherism' attitude in one way or the other affect job placement without considering the level of education attained and the skills required on the job. A highly placed official would prefer to fill a vacant position with a candidate from his village/town without minding the neither qualification nor ability of the favoured person. All these have inhibited upward social mobility. More so, the economy is no more buoyant enough to provide immediate employment for fresh graduates, in fact graduates are turned out more than the number of existing vacancies. In this instance, education does not seem to contribute to upward social mobility as so many graduates roam around the streets with their files seeking for white collar jobs that are no longer there. Some have resorted to armed robbery, kidnapping, prostitution, pipeline vandalism just to mention but a few while some are keke drivers, butchers, cobblers etc. In some cases, many firms and organizations as well as some government parastatals embark on early retrenchment of workers, educational qualification not withstanding

## **2.7 CONCLUSION**

From the foregoing, one would conclude that education has significant effect on the level of social mobility among individuals and social groups. The movement within the social ladder is a reflection of educational attainment. Education determines prestige, income and housing which in turn determine life style and life chances. Although education is a

necessary factor that facilitates social mobility but there are other factors such as wealth and political power to mention but a few. Nepotism and tribalism also hinders social mobility.

## 2.8 RECOMMENDATIONS

Government should endeavour to reduce the disparity in Educational opportunities

Government should provide employment opportunities for graduates.

Those in authority should shun nepotism and corruption so that everyone will have equal opportunity for upward social mobility.

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