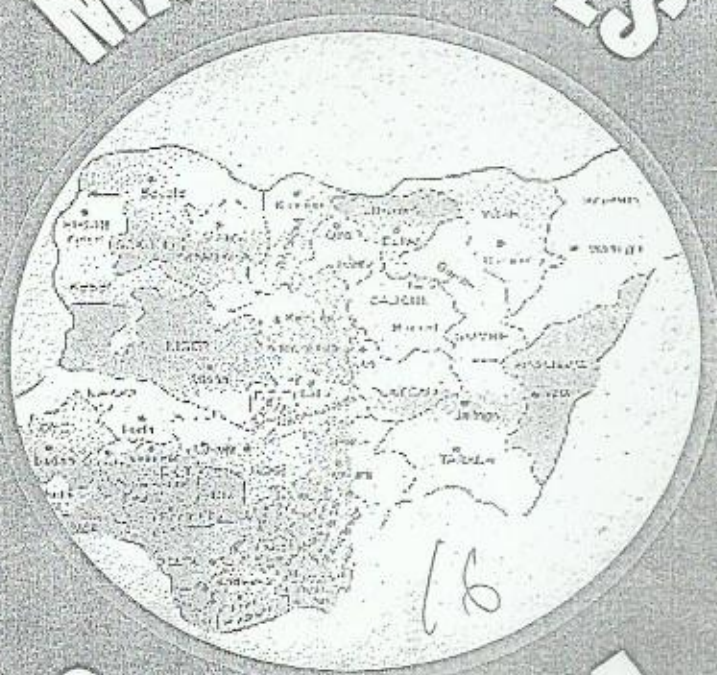


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STATUS AND POWER ASPIRATION AMONG UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUTES IN NIGERIA: THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

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Introduction

The common issue in universities is the hierarchical structures among the undergraduate students in which there is coincidence of political, economic and academic powers according to reputation and status. They may be resisted not only by those at the top of the hierarchy but also by those who aspire to become leaders. The specialists in the universities as elsewhere are not only vehicles for the inner competition, struggle for status and careers but also systems in which the individual members construct their self-awareness of their own identity. On the other hand, the economic situation in universities, the opportunities for promotion, even the possible fears of redundancy, may cause a weakening of the coherence of subject based disciplinary groups and promote a positive movement of individuals to broader fields of study.

According to Broom and Selznick (1969:104) 'like most other institutions of modern society, schools have become complex bureaucracies. There have always been administrative officials among the students at all levels of educational system. Administrators not only perform the kind of work that is needed by any bureaucracy, they also do something peculiar to the function of education. Among these special activities are the classification and the allocation of students'.

Most of the students in the university are within seventeen to twenty-five years of age. In essence, they are mostly adolescents and is a crucial period of storms, stress, and challenges in life. The students at this period have special needs, which the adults or the university authority must acknowledge and meet (Ubom, 2002:9).

Adolescents form groups of varying size in school to meet their social needs (Akinboye, 1987:28). They do not only want to form peer groups, they are interested in asserting the identity of their groups to greater heights. As a result of this, we have clubs and societies of different names and objectives springing up in the universities. Gesinde (1979:18) and Denga (2001:31) remark that adolescents place themselves on the threshold of adult and seek to consolidate their identity.

The university students aspiring for power kick against the rules and regulations formulated and implement their own rules and regulations; and in most of the social groups, they demand from the adults moral and financial support, encouragement and empowerment (Ubom, 2000:12).

Status and Power Aspiration

Status is used frequently to refer only to the ranking of a social position or role, or of the occupants of such roles (Chinoy, 1967:28). The system of status constitutes a dimension of social stratification which is considered both independently of and in relation to the division of society into economically-based classes. Status of individuals then, may be ascribed or achieved, based upon relatively fixed criteria over which the individual has no control—ancestry, inherited wealth or ethnic affiliation, upon qualities or attributes that can be gained by some direct action or luck. Ascribed status however, puts strong pressure upon the individual to acquire the appropriate manner and skill so as to remain at the social level to which he is born.

Status as Mills in Chinoy (1967:29) points out "involves at least two persons: one to claim it and another to honour the claim". Unless both agree upon the appropriate grounds for prestige there can be no consistent status structure when there is no consensus upon status values. In particular groups may find

particularly in more narrow "Social" activities, rather than with persons of higher or lower status. Because they share the same status values, they approve of one another and disparage those who fail to live up to their standards of behaviour; to the extent that they set themselves off from others, limit participation in certain social activities to those of similar prestige and establish and maintain social relationship with one another. They can be said to constitute a status group.

Power

Power refers to the ability of individuals and groups to realize their will in human affairs even if it involves the resistance of others. It provides answers to the questions of whose interests will be served and whose values will reign (William, Hartnett & Erich, 2004:1). Power is the capacity to control the actions of others, and to command. These are the features of most if not all social structures. Many roles and statuses consist prescriptions of authority or an approved freedom of action that affects the behaviour of others. Although the study of power is essential in political analysis, which is by no means confined to government. For instance, students engage in students union government election in the campus in order to promote their power aspiration and prestige in the campus above other students, some join cults and gangs for militant and physical power over others (Chinoy, 1967:28). Power may be more widely distributed among competing individuals and groups, none of whom is able, nor perhaps motivated, to influence a wide range of decisions at the school level. Furthermore, interrelations of groups with National Association of Nigeria Students (NANS) may further diminish Students Union Government (SUG) of universities. Chinoy (1967:33) states that class, status and power represent the principal interest found in any system of stratification as men pursue economic gain, protect and aspire to social standing and reputation, and seek control over others or to gain freedom from control.

Status and Power Aspiration through Student Unionism in Nigerian Universities

Student unionism is as old as the universities. The most remarkable event in the field of education during the medieval period was the growth of universities, the earliest which started during the twelfth century A. D as outgrowth of cathedral schools. Some cathedral schools became famous for their scholarship and therefore attracted students and scholars from different parts of Europe. To protect themselves from exploitation and abuse, the masters and students organized themselves into union in line with the guild of the Middle Ages. (Jacks, 1975:41). The first students union involving West Africans was formed in Britain by West African students. According to Okeke (2002:34) the formation of the students union by African students in Britain was as a result of the students protest against the disciplinary practice meted to them by the whites.

Students union came into existence in Nigeria about 1939 and it was a unifying organisation for students. Between 1956 and 1957, the National Union of Nigeria Students (NUNS) was formed. Okeke (2002:34) states the objectives of NUNS as follows:

1. to preserve, protect and defend the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria;
2. to represent the interest of Nigerian students both nationally and internationally;
3. to harmonize and co-ordinate the activities of member union;
4. to defend consistently, the autonomy of institutions of higher learning, academic freedom and democratization of education in Nigeria and other parts of the world, the right of all persons to education and work without any hindrance on the basis of sex or beliefs;
5. to encourage students in specialized discipline and stimulate an academic interchange of ideas at seminars, conferences and symposia; and
6. to encourage Nigerian students in sporting, social and cultural activities and provide adequate platform on these bases.

Students union in this paper is described as a body uniting the students and which is recognized by the university authority as a representative of the entire students in the university. Students' unions exist in universities to achieve common interest, for instance, to look into student's welfare, to help the university

and the society which helps in promoting status and power aspiration among the undergraduate students.

In view of the above, the aims of higher education in the National Policy on Education document states that higher education aims at:

1. The acquisition, development and inculcation of the proper value-orientation for the survival of the individual and society;
2. The acquisition of both physical and intellectual skills which enable individuals to develop into useful members of the community; and
3. The acquisition of an objective view of the local and external environment (NPE, 2004:34-35)

The above stated goals are expected to be pursued through teaching, research, and dissemination of existing and new information.

The undergraduate students having acquired and developed proper value orientation, intellectual capacities and skills therefore begins to pursue power and status in the university environment so as to practicalise what they have learnt in specific areas of studies.

Social and Political Integration

Education, apart from its function in transmitting culture, bestowing status and acting as an agent of social change, also promotes social and political integration by transforming a population composed of diverse racial, ethnic and religious groups into a society whose members share to some extent a common identity. Universities play an important role in socialising the undergraduates according to the norms, values, and beliefs of the society. In view of this, Schaefer (2000:79) and Hughes (1999:43) argue that education helps to inculcate the dominant values of a society in order to achieve common national goals. Also, Broom and Selznick (1969:84) assert that formal education is a major agency for transforming social and political integration among university students. The function of education enables undergraduates in Nigeria, irrespective of their ethnic, religious and economic background to come together under the same umbrella and be able to tolerate and accommodate each other without conflict for the purpose of aspiring for status and power.

Finally, Broom and Selznick (1969) emphasise that peer group in school exists for the sake of learning together and sociability. This is in relation to the social and political integration as a social function of education which promotes status and power aspiration among the learners through socialisation.

Conclusion

In this paper, the functions of education in the light of promoting status and power amongst undergraduates in Nigerian Universities have been explored. It is observed that the socialisation of new generations, necessarily takes place in all societies, this is also applicable among the undergraduates in the university setting in which those that belong to the upper class, aspire for power and status over others in the lower class, although it assumes many different forms in respect of the social groups and institutions involved. The undergraduate students in Nigeria can only promote status and power aspiration through the social functions of education.

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