

CRITIQUE OF RAWLS'S PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION IN RELATION TO THE NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

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Abstract

This critique examined John Rawls's philosophy of education in relation to the Nigerian educational system, exploring its potential to promote fairness and equality. Rawls's theory of justice as fairness emphasizes equal access to education and resources, prioritizing the least advantaged members of society. The Nigerian educational system faces challenges such as inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, and unequal access to quality education, hindering social mobility and perpetuating inequality. This critique argues that Rawls's philosophy can inform Nigerian educational policies, promoting equal opportunities and social justice. However, contextual factors and cultural nuances must be considered when applying Rawls's theory to the Nigerian context. The critique provides an in-depth analysis of Rawls's philosophy of education, its relevance to the Nigerian educational system, and its implications for policy and practice. By exploring the potential benefits and limitations of Rawls's philosophy, this critique aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion on improving the Nigerian educational system and promoting social justice. Ultimately, this critique seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex relationships between education, justice, and equality in the Nigerian context.

Keywords: Rawls's Philosophy, Theory of Justice, Justice as Fairness, Educational Equity, Nigerian Educational System

Introduction

The Nigerian educational system has faced numerous challenges, including inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, and unequal access to quality education. These challenges have hindered social mobility, perpetuated inequality, and limited opportunities for disadvantaged groups. John Rawls's philosophy of education, centered on justice as fairness, offers a framework for addressing these issues. Rawls's (1971) theory prioritizes equal access to education and resources, promoting social equality and fairness. This critique

explores the relevance and limitations of Rawls's philosophy in the Nigerian educational context, examining its potential to promote equal opportunities and social justice. By analyzing Rawls's theory and its implications for policy and practice, this critique aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion on improving the Nigerian educational system. The critique will examine the potential benefits and limitations of Rawls's philosophy, providing a nuanced understanding of the complex relationships between education, justice, and equality in the Nigerian context. Furthermore, this critique will explore the implications of Rawls's philosophy for policy and practice, providing recommendations for promoting equal access, fairness, and social justice in the Nigerian educational system.

Rawls's Philosophy of Education

Rawls's philosophy of education is rooted in his theory of justice as fairness, which emphasizes equal basic liberties and the distribution of resources to benefit the least advantaged members of society (Rawls, 1971). According to Rawls, education should be designed to promote social equality and fairness, providing equal opportunities for all, regardless of socio-economic background. This can be achieved through policies such as free public education and targeted support for disadvantaged students.

Rawls's philosophy of education emphasizes the importance of critical thinking, autonomy, and civic engagement (Rawls, 1993). He believes that education should foster a sense of justice and promote the development of individuals who can participate in democratic decision-making processes. By prioritizing critical thinking and autonomy, Rawls's philosophy aims to promote social equality and fairness. Rawls outlines two principles of justice relevant to education: the equal basic liberties principle and the difference principle (Rawls, 1971). The equal basic liberties principle emphasizes the importance of equal access to education and resources, while the difference principle prioritizes the least advantaged members of society.

Syllabus of Rawls's Education

A syllabus based on Rawls's philosophy of education would prioritize:

- 1. Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving: Encouraging students to analyze complex issues and develop well-reasoned arguments:** Critical thinking and problem-solving are foundational to a well-rounded education, particularly in an era marked by rapid technological change and social complexity. Encouraging students to think critically means teaching them to go beyond rote memorization and instead engage deeply with content by questioning assumptions, analyzing evidence, comparing perspectives, and drawing logical conclusions. It empowers learners to handle ambiguity, challenge dogma, and approach real-world problems with creativity and intellectual rigor. This is essential not just in academic settings but also in everyday life where decisions must often be made under uncertainty or incomplete information. Incorporating critical thinking and problem-solving into the Nigerian educational system requires a shift from traditional, teacher-centered instruction to more interactive, student-centered learning. Students must be encouraged to ask questions, debate ideas, and work collaboratively to find solutions to local and global issues (Ibrahim, 2014). For example, in subjects like civic education, students could be tasked with analyzing societal problems such as electoral malpractice or

environmental degradation and proposing practical interventions. By cultivating these skills early, the education system can produce graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also capable of independent thought and innovation.

- 2. Civic Engagement and Social Responsibility: Fostering a sense of justice and promoting community involvement:** Civic engagement and social responsibility are critical for nurturing citizens who are aware of their rights, duties, and roles within society. Education should aim to instill in students a deep understanding of justice, democracy, human rights, and the importance of participating in civic life. When students are taught to care about their communities and to understand how public institutions operate, they are more likely to become active and informed citizens. This aligns closely with Rawls's philosophy, which emphasizes justice as fairness and the importance of societal cooperation in achieving equitable outcomes. In the Nigerian context, promoting civic engagement through education can help address persistent challenges such as political apathy, corruption, and ethnic division (UNESCO, 2021). Students should be exposed to community service projects, school-based governance activities, and simulations of democratic processes to internalize these values. Civic education should go beyond theory to practical applications that encourage learners to take responsibility for their communities and advocate for change. Through such engagement, schools can serve as a foundation for nurturing socially responsible adults who contribute meaningfully to the development of the nation.
- 3. Autonomy and Self-Development: Supporting students in developing their own goals and aspirations:** Autonomy and self-development are essential for fostering individual growth and lifelong learning. An effective educational system should support students in discovering their passions, developing their talents, and setting personal and professional goals (Ujo, 2021). This involves creating an environment where learners are not just passive recipients of knowledge but active participants in their own educational journeys. Such an approach encourages motivation, resilience, and a sense of ownership over one's future, which are all key to personal fulfillment and societal contribution. In Nigeria, the current emphasis on standardized testing and rigid curricula can sometimes stifle student autonomy and creativity. To promote self-development, schools should provide opportunities for exploration, mentorship, and personalized learning. Career guidance programs, extracurricular activities, and flexible learning pathways can help students identify their strengths and chart a course that aligns with their interests. Additionally, incorporating reflective practices and goal-setting exercises into the curriculum can help students build self-awareness and responsibility. By valuing each learner's individuality, the educational system can empower students to shape their own identities and futures.
- 4. Equality and Fairness: Promoting equal opportunities and treatment for all students:** Equality and fairness are central to any just and democratic educational system. These principles require that all students, regardless of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, or ability, have access to quality education, resources, and support. Rawls's principle of justice as fairness emphasizes the moral imperative of equal basic rights and the fair distribution of opportunities—a vision that directly applies to education. Ensuring fairness in schools helps bridge societal gaps and creates a more inclusive society where everyone has the chance to succeed. In Nigeria, disparities in educational access and

outcomes are still significant, particularly between rural and urban areas, and among different socio-economic groups (UNICEF, 2020). Addressing these inequalities requires intentional policy efforts, including equitable funding, inclusive curriculum design, provision of learning materials, and support services for disadvantaged students. Schools must also combat discrimination and bias, ensuring that all students feel valued and respected. When equality and fairness are made visible priorities in the classroom and beyond, students are more likely to internalize these values and advocate for them in their communities, leading to a more just and cohesive society.

The syllabus would also include topics such as:

- a. **Theories of Justice:** Theories of justice provide foundational frameworks that influence how educational systems distribute opportunities, resources, and recognition. Among the most prominent are Rawls's theory of "Justice as Fairness", which emphasizes equal basic liberties and the fair distribution of socio-economic advantages; utilitarianism, which seeks the greatest good for the greatest number; and libertarianism, which prioritizes individual rights and minimal state interference. In education, these theories yield different policy approaches: Rawlsian justice supports compensatory education for disadvantaged groups, utilitarianism may focus on maximizing national productivity through merit-based education, and libertarianism emphasizes school choice and privatization. By critically comparing these theories, policymakers and educators can better understand how values such as equity, liberty, and efficiency can guide decisions around access, curriculum design, resource allocation, and educational evaluation.
- b. **Educational Policy and Reform:** Rawls's philosophy, particularly the Difference Principle, offers a compelling lens for evaluating educational policy and reform. This principle holds that social and economic inequalities are acceptable only if they benefit the least advantaged members of society. Applying this to education, policies should aim to uplift students from marginalized backgrounds such as those in rural areas, low-income families, or with disabilities by providing greater support and access to quality schooling. For instance, reforms such as free basic education, targeted scholarship programs, and inclusive curricula align with Rawlsian ideals. In Nigeria, where educational inequality is a persistent challenge, Rawls's theory challenges policymakers to evaluate reforms not by how they benefit the average student, but by how they improve outcomes for the most disadvantaged. Thus, Rawls's framework encourages a more ethically grounded and equitable approach to educational development.

Critique of Rawls's Philosophy of Education

While Rawls's philosophy of education offers valuable insights, it has been criticized for:

Overemphasis on Individual Rights: Potentially Neglecting Communal and Cultural Values: One of the key critiques of Rawls's theory of justice, particularly when applied to education in contexts like Nigeria, is its strong emphasis on individual rights, which may inadvertently sideline communal and cultural values. Rawls prioritizes individual liberty and autonomy, especially in his first principle of justice, which asserts equal basic rights and freedoms for all individuals (Rawls, 1971). However, in many African societies, including

Nigeria, education is not just a personal endeavor but a communal responsibility that reflects the collective aspirations of the family and society (Okafor, 2006). The overemphasis on individualism can conflict with indigenous philosophies like *Ubuntu*, which stress interconnectedness, mutual respect, and the common good. Consequently, educational models inspired by Rawls may struggle to fully align with community-centered values that view learning as both a personal and social journey. Ignoring these communal dimensions may result in culturally dissonant policies that hinder the educational engagement of learners who derive identity and purpose from their community ties.

Idealistic Assumptions: Assuming that Institutions and Individuals Will Act Fairly and Justly: Another limitation of Rawls's philosophy is its idealistic assumption that institutions and individuals will act fairly and uphold principles of justice once established. Rawls envisions a "well-ordered society" where citizens are rational and reasonable, and where institutions operate impartially to promote fairness (Rawls, 1993). While this may be a useful theoretical construct, it often contrasts sharply with real-world educational systems, especially in countries like Nigeria, where corruption, nepotism, and systemic inefficiencies pervade educational governance (Ibrahim, 2014). Teachers may favor students based on ethnic, religious, or socioeconomic factors, while policymakers may prioritize elite schools over rural ones for political gain. Rawls's theory does not sufficiently account for these practical challenges, making it less applicable in settings where institutions are fragile or where public trust in fairness is low. As a result, educational justice cannot rely solely on philosophical ideals but must also address the socio-political realities that distort policy implementation.

Limited Consideration of Power Dynamics: Failing to Fully Account for the Impact of Power Imbalances on Educational Outcome: Rawls's theory has also been criticized for its limited consideration of power dynamics; particularly how deeply embedded inequalities affect access to quality education. While Rawls acknowledges the need to assist the least advantaged, his framework does not deeply interrogate how historical and structural power imbalances such as colonial legacies, class hierarchies, and patriarchal systems continue to influence educational outcomes (Young, 1990). In the Nigerian context, power disparities manifest in the urban-rural divide, gender discrimination, and the dominance of certain ethnic groups in educational leadership. These imbalances affect who gets to attend elite schools, who shapes the curriculum, and who benefits from educational reforms. Critics argue that Rawls's abstract principles lack the critical edge needed to expose and dismantle these forms of oppression (Fraser, 2009). Therefore, a more grounded approach to educational justice would require not only redistribution of resources but also a transformation of power relations within the system.

The Nigerian Educational System

The Nigerian educational system faces numerous challenges, including:

a. Inadequate Funding: Insufficient resources for infrastructure, teacher training, and materials:

Inadequate funding remains a critical barrier to effective educational development in Nigeria and many other developing countries. Limited budgetary allocations often result in

insufficient investment in essential areas such as school infrastructure, teacher training, instructional materials, and administrative capacity. According to UNESCO recommendations, countries should allocate at least 15–20% of their national budgets to education; however, Nigeria consistently falls short of this benchmark, with allocations often below 10% (UNESCO, 2021). The consequence is a public education system plagued by overcrowded classrooms, poorly paid and undertrained teachers, outdated textbooks, and inadequate teaching aids. This chronic underfunding hampers the ability of schools to provide quality education and adapt to 21st-century demands, such as digital literacy and inclusive education. Without substantial and sustained investment, any meaningful reform aimed at achieving equitable and quality education for all remains a distant goal.

b. Inequality and Access: Unequal access to quality education, particularly for disadvantaged groups

Educational inequality continues to undermine social justice and economic development in Nigeria, where access to quality education is heavily influenced by factors such as location, gender, socioeconomic status, and disability. Children in rural and marginalized communities often attend poorly equipped schools and are taught by underqualified teachers compared to their urban counterparts. Girls, particularly in the northern regions of the country, face additional barriers such as early marriage, cultural biases, and safety concerns that limit their educational attainment (UNICEF, 2020). Similarly, children with disabilities are often excluded due to the lack of inclusive infrastructure and trained support staff. These disparities create a deeply stratified system where only a privileged few have the opportunity to benefit from a high-quality education. To bridge this gap, policies must be designed not only to expand access but also to ensure that all students, regardless of background, receive the support they need to succeed.

c. Poor Infrastructure: Inadequate facilities, technology, and resources

Poor infrastructure is a major impediment to the delivery of quality education, especially in public schools across Nigeria. Many schools lack basic amenities such as clean water, electricity, functional classrooms, and sanitary facilities. The absence of proper furniture, science laboratories, libraries, and ICT equipment further restricts effective teaching and learning. According to a 2019 report by the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics, over 50% of public schools in the country operate without access to electricity, and many rural schools conduct lessons under trees or in dilapidated buildings. This environment not only affects student performance and attendance but also demoralizes teachers and undermines their ability to deliver engaging instruction. The digital divide has become even more apparent in the wake of global shifts toward e-learning, highlighting the urgent need for investment in educational technology infrastructure. Without addressing these physical and technological gaps, efforts to reform and modernize education will likely remain ineffective.

Relationship between Rawls's Philosophy of Education and the Nigerian Educational System

Rawls's philosophy of education can inform Nigerian educational policies by:

1. Justice as Fairness and Educational Equity

Rawls's central idea of **justice as fairness**, which prioritizes equal basic liberties and the fair distribution of social advantages, has significant implications for education in Nigeria. In

Rawls's view, inequalities are only justified if they benefit the least advantaged members of society (Rawls, 1971). Applied to education, this means ensuring that all students, regardless of background, have equal access to quality learning environments, teaching, and resources. In Nigeria, however, vast disparities exist between urban and rural schools, public and private institutions, and among socio-economic and gender groups (UNICEF, 2020). Aligning Nigerian educational policy with Rawlsian justice would require targeted interventions to uplift underprivileged students and reduce systemic inequalities in access and achievement.

2. Equal Educational Opportunity and the Nigerian Reality

Rawls emphasized the need for **fair equality of opportunity**, which means that all individuals should have the same chance to attain positions of advantage, regardless of their social origins (Rawls, 1993). In education, this principle demands not only formal access to schools but also the provision of conditions necessary for success, such as qualified teachers, learning materials, and supportive environments. Unfortunately, in Nigeria, children from poor or rural areas often attend underfunded schools with limited instructional support, undermining their ability to compete fairly with peers from more privileged backgrounds (NBS, 2019). Rawls's framework exposes these inequities and suggests that true justice in education requires more than superficial equality—it requires compensatory strategies to level the playing field.

Implications of Rawls's Theory for Nigerian Education

John Rawls's theory of justice, particularly as articulated in his concept of "justice as fairness," holds significant implications for reforming and reimagining the Nigerian educational system. His principle that social and economic inequalities are only justifiable if they benefit the least advantaged members of society (Rawls, 1971) directly challenges the structural inequalities prevalent in Nigerian education today. Nigeria's educational landscape is marked by stark disparities in access, quality, and outcomes between rural and urban areas, public and private schools, and across socio-economic, gender, and regional lines (UNICEF, 2020). Rawls's Difference Principle implies that government policies and resources must be targeted specifically at reducing these disparities and uplifting the most marginalized groups. Another important implication is Rawls's emphasis on fair equality of opportunity, which goes beyond formal access to education and focuses on creating conditions that allow all students to succeed regardless of their backgrounds (Rawls, 1993). In Nigeria, while there have been efforts such as the Universal Basic Education (UBE) program, many students' particularly those in northern Nigeria, girls, and children with disabilities still face significant structural barriers, including under-resourced schools, cultural biases, and poor teacher quality (UNESCO, 2021). To align with Rawlsian justice, educational reforms must address these systemic inequalities by prioritizing funding, improving teacher training in underserved areas, and making curricula more inclusive.

Moreover, Rawls's theory implies the need for transparent, just, and accountable institutions to implement educational policies effectively. He believed that a just society is sustained by institutions that consistently uphold fairness and promote the common good (Rawls, 2001). In Nigeria, however, the education sector is often weakened by poor governance, misallocation of resources, and corruption (Ibrahim, 2014). Applying Rawls's

framework suggests a need for educational institutions to be restructured to ensure equity-driven policymaking, participatory decision-making, and strict accountability mechanisms.

Finally, Rawls's notion of reciprocity and mutual respect supports the development of civic values through education. Nigerian schools should not only teach academic skills but also cultivate democratic principles, tolerance, and social responsibility—core components of Rawls's vision of a well-ordered society (Rawls, 1993). This is especially important in Nigeria's multicultural context, where inter-ethnic and religious tensions threaten national unity. Education, when structured around Rawlsian ideals, can become a tool for fostering peace, justice, and sustainable development by preparing citizens who are conscious of their rights and responsibilities in a democratic society.

Challenges in Implementing Rawls's Theory of Justice in Nigeria

There are various challenges in the implementation of Rawls's theory of justice in Nigeria among which are:

- 1. Deep-Rooted Inequality:** One of the biggest challenges in applying Rawls's theory in Nigeria is the entrenched socio-economic and regional inequality that distorts access to quality education. Rawls's *Difference Principle* promotes inequality only if it benefits the least advantaged, but in Nigeria, inequality is often reinforced by unequal allocation of resources. For instance, urban schools tend to be better equipped and staffed than rural ones, and northern regions face greater educational deprivation due to poverty, conflict, and cultural barriers (UNICEF, 2020). This entrenched disparity contradicts Rawls's principle of fair opportunity and makes implementation difficult without comprehensive structural reform.
- 2. Weak Educational Institutions:** Rawls's vision relies heavily on the presence of strong, just institutions that can consistently uphold fairness and equal opportunity (Rawls, 1971). In Nigeria, however, the education sector is often undermined by poor governance, inconsistent policy implementation, corruption, and lack of accountability (Ibrahim, 2014). Policies designed to help the disadvantaged are frequently poorly executed or diverted from their intended beneficiaries. The lack of transparent systems and efficient administration makes it hard to enforce the kind of equitable education Rawls's theory demands.
- 3. Cultural and Communal Values vs Individualism:** Rawls's theory is grounded in liberal individualism, emphasizing individual rights and autonomy. However, Nigerian society is deeply communal and shaped by cultural, religious, and traditional norms that prioritize collective identity and responsibilities over individual freedoms (Okafor, 2006). This cultural divergence can create resistance to Rawlsian ideals, especially when educational policies emphasize meritocracy and choice in ways that may overlook communal expectations or obligations. Implementing Rawls's theory, therefore, requires a contextual adaptation that respects local values while promoting justice and fairness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Rawls's philosophy of education within the context of the Nigerian educational system, it becomes evident that while his principles of justice as fairness, equal opportunity, and support for the least advantaged offer a compelling ethical framework for education, several limitations exist in their practical application. Nigeria's deep-rooted

inequality, weak institutional capacity, cultural values, and political instability pose significant obstacles to the realization of Rawlsian ideals. Moreover, Rawls's reliance on idealized assumptions such as the fairness of institutions and rational agreement among citizens does not fully capture the realities of a complex, diverse, and unevenly developed society like Nigeria. Despite these challenges, his theory still offers valuable insights for driving educational reforms aimed at inclusivity, equity, and democratic citizenship.

Recommendations

Based on the proceeding work, the paper recommends the following:

1. The Nigerian government should embrace Rawls's *Difference Principle* by directing more resources and targeted interventions toward disadvantaged learners particularly those in rural areas, low-income families, and marginalized groups such as girls and children with disabilities.
2. To apply Rawlsian principles effectively, Nigeria must build transparent, accountable, and efficient educational institutions capable of implementing equitable policies, distributing resources fairly, and reducing corruption.
3. Policymakers should adapt Rawls's philosophy to Nigeria's cultural and communal realities. Rather than applying a purely individualistic model, education reforms should integrate communal values that emphasize collective responsibility and social cohesion.

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