



IGBO APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM AND THE RIGHT OF THE CHILD TO BASIC EDUCATION: SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

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Abstract

International, as well as local legal instruments uphold education as a human right. Education is meant to be free and compulsory at the elementary and fundamental stages and it is the duty of the government to provide it. For Nigeria, according to the Child Rights Act, the fundamental stages include junior secondary education. It is obvious that the form of education meant by these provisions is the formal and western version. The aim of education has been stated to include, among other goals, lifting people out of poverty and the provision of a better life. The Igbo Apprenticeship system, which though not formal, has proven to be not only a sure way of lifting people out of poverty, but a recognized means of wealth creation, requires the child to be absorbed at an early stage in order to acquire the full benefit of the model. Should the pursuit of this model be viewed as an infringement of the right of the child to education or can it be categorized as an educational package on its own. The methodology used in this work is doctrinal and the result is a finding that this model does more to accomplish one of the stated goals of education, especially in a developing country like Nigeria. The government should take steps to formally recognize this model, amend the law to accommodate it and set up an agency to oversee the operations.

Keywords: Apprenticeship, Igbo apprenticeship system, Right to Education, Child rights, Poverty Alleviation.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Right to Education

Education has been defined as the process of receiving or giving systemic instruction, especially at a school or university, it is seen as an enlightening experience.¹ According to UNESCO, it includes 'all types and levels of education, including access to education, the standard and quality of education and the conditions under which it is given.'² Education is an "indispensable tool" that helps individuals deal with challenges they will face in their lifetimes and promotes the enjoyment of other human rights.³ A plethora of rights instruments recognize the right to education as human right as well as child right.

1.2 Apprenticeship

Apprenticeship is a system for training a new generation of practitioners of a trade or profession (apprentices) with on-the-job training and often accompanying study.⁴ Most of their training is done while working for an employer who helps the apprentices learn their trade or profession, in exchange for their continued labor for an agreed period after they have achieved measurable competencies.⁵ It is an age-long system of transferring skills, trade, business or craft from one generation to another. It is practiced throughout Nigeria, and is considered basic training for life vocations. For the Igbos of Nigeria, a new model was created after the war to fill the void created by the loss of everything

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¹Oxford Languages and google <languages.oup.com>

² UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education (CADE), 1960, Article 1(2).

³ General comment no. 1: aims of Education

⁴ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apprenticeship

⁵ *ibid*



(ranging from property to monies in the bank, to formally held positions and jobs, etc) and lack of employment. This model of apprenticeship has since grown and flourished, leading to economic emancipation for the Igbos. The model is marked by the practice where an Oga (a master) with an established business picks a boy of tender age (nwaboyi) to train and establish in the same business. It is a system that has largely boosted the economy and helped people acquire a viable means of livelihood especially in Nigeria where the creation of employment for citizens has become an uphill task for government. Some have argued that the pursuit of this model of apprenticeship is an infringement on the right of the child to basic education since it absorbs children mostly at the very tender age of between ten and fourteen.

2.0 Types of apprenticeship

Apprenticeships can be divided into two main categories: Independent and Cooperative.

2.1 Independent Apprenticeships are those organized and managed by employers, without any involvement from educational institutions. They happen dissociated from any educational curricula, which means that, usually, the apprentices are not involved in any educational programme at the same time but, even if they are, there is no relation between the undergoing studies and the apprenticeship.

2.2 Cooperative Apprenticeships are those organized and managed in cooperation between educational institutions and employers. They vary in terms of governance, some being more employer lead and others more educational institution lead, but they are always associated with a curriculum and are designed as a means for students to put theory in practice and master knowledge in a way that empowers them with professional autonomy.⁶

3.1 Igbo Apprenticeship System

The Igbo Apprenticeship System is a kind of informal and unstructured training programme, scheduled for an agreed period of time, which a person undergoes in order to acquire a desirable aspect of entrepreneurship skill. It is a vibrant part of the Igbo business attributes that has for long been shaping their mental and intelligent quotient about business success. The Igbo Apprenticeship System is an unpaid business apprenticeship/incubator model that allow people learn business from a master for a certain number of years (5- 8) depending and at the end of their apprenticeship tenure, get cash infusion and support to start their own business. There is no salary paid during the time of the apprenticeship tenure but meals, clothing and fare are provided for by the master. When the years of learning are over, the boy is as good as his master.⁷

The Igbo Apprenticeship System has been described as a communal enterprising framework where successful businesses develop others, and over time provide capital and give away their customers to the new businesses. The implication is that few businesses grow to become very dominant since they keep relinquishing market share, and in doing so, they accomplish one thing: a large equal community where everyone has opportunities, no matter how small.⁸ Hence the system is regarded as the largest business incubator in the world as thousands of business ventures are established each year through it.⁹

3.2.0 Forms of Igbo Apprenticeship

Basically, an apprentice may learn a trade (*imu ahia*), or a skill or craft (*imu oru*), both forms of apprenticeship however, converge in the prominent model: *igba boyi*.

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Alike & Orjiako-Umunze, "Socio-Economic Philosophy of contemporary igbo apprenticeship System" (Nnadiabube Journal of Philosophy), vol 3, No 1 (2019), p.43. Accessed 30/13/25.

⁸ N Ekeke "A Nigerian model for stakeholder capitalism" 2021 available at <https://hbr.org/2021/05/a-nigerian-model-for-stakeholder-capitalism>. accessed 20/3/2025.

⁹ *ibid*



3.2.1 Imu Ahia

Imu ahia is learning a trade. The apprentice in this regard is usually a lot older than the apprentice in the *Igba boy* version. He may be a secondary school or even university graduate. This is done for a much shorter period ranging from a few months to two years. It is related to *Igba boyi* in the sense that the apprentice is also taught the business but the differences are glaring; some of which are:

- i. The apprentice pays to learn the business which is not the case with the *igba boyi* version.
- ii. He basically does not live in the master's house, is not as close to the master as the *nwa boy*, so may not get all the secrets of the business.
- iii. The master does not feel responsible for his success in business.
- iv. It is not the duty of the master to ensure he succeeds in the future so he is on his own after learning the trade or craft.
- v. The master is not required to provide him with seed capital.

3.2.2 Imu Oru

Imu oru is learning a skill or craft. The apprentice may be a child or an adult, but generally older than the apprentice in the *igba boyi* version. This is more closely related to *imu ahia*, in that the apprentice also pay for the training. In this practice of apprenticeship, the learner is not mandated to stay in the same house as the master. Thus, such learner is to pay a specified amount of money which serves as a payment for the skills he is to acquire within an agreed period of time. In this practice, the learner has a resumption time and takes care of the shop during his working hour. Furthermore, the master does not settle the learner with any goods or cash.¹⁰

3.3.3 Igba Boyi

The *Igba Boyi* model of apprenticeship requires that the child, at the age of between eleven and fourteen years, leaves his parents' house and goes to live with his master. He becomes a part of his master's family, while the master fulfils the role of a father to him. The master provides him with basic needs like feeding, shelter and clothing while he serves. He does not only serve at the business place, but is also required to fulfil his own quota of domestic chores in the master's house. He becomes an integral part of his master's business, which might be a trade, a skill, or a craft. It is the master's duty to teach him the secrets of the business so he can stand on his own when settled. He serves for five, six, or seven years, after which the master settles him. The aforesaid settlement may take the shape of fund, goods, a shop, customer base or any combination of these.

4.0 Legal Framework for Child Right to Education

4.1 UDHR

The UDHR provides that everyone has the right to education, and that education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.¹¹ Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.¹²

The UDHR is the primary international rights instrument. Its provisions are not binding on states, but they form the basis for the provisions of other conventions which are binding. Hence, the provisions of the UDHR with regard to the right to education is reiterated in article 13 of ICESCR (International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966).

¹⁰ Alike & Orjiako-Umunze, "Socio-Economic Philosophy of contemporary igbo apprenticeship System" (Nnadiabube Journal of Philosophy), vol 3, No 1 (2019), p.35-48. Accessed 30/13/25.

¹¹ UDHR 1948, Article 26(1) <un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights. Accessed 24/03/25

¹² *Ibid*, article 26(2)



4.2 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

The CRC provides that the education of the child shall be directed to the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential; the development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, and the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, etc.¹³

4.3 African Youth Charter, 2006

African Youth Charter provides that every young person shall have the right to education of good quality. The value of multiple forms of education, including formal, non-formal, informal, distance learning and lifelong learning, to meet the diverse needs of young people shall be embraced. The education of young people shall be directed to: the promotion and holistic development of the young person's cognitive and creative and emotional abilities to their full potential; Preparing young people for responsible lives in free societies that promote peace, understanding, tolerance, dialogue, mutual respect and friendship among all nations and across all groupings of people; The development of life skills to function effectively in society ... as part of the education curricula; States Parties shall take all appropriate measures with a view to achieving full realization of this right and shall, in particular:

- a. Provide free and compulsory basic education and take steps to minimize the indirect costs of education;
- b. Make all forms of secondary education more readily available and accessible by all possible means including progressively free;
- c. Take steps to encourage regular school attendance and reduce drop-out rates;
- d. Revitalize vocational education and training relevant to current and prospective employment opportunities and expand access by developing centers in rural and remote areas;
- e. Avail multiple access points for education and skills development including opportunities outside of mainstream educational institutions e.g., workplace skills development, distance learning, adult literacy and national youth service programmes;
- f. Allocate resources to upgrade the quality of education delivered and ensure that it is relevant to the needs of contemporary society and engenders critical thinking rather than rote thinking. Adopt preferential recruitment policies for African youth with specialized skills amongst States Parties.¹⁴

4.4 UNESCO

UNESCO is the only United Nations agency with a mandate to cover all aspects of education. It has been entrusted to lead the Global Education 2030 Agenda through Sustainable Development Goal 4. The organization believes that education is a human right for all throughout life and that access must be matched by quality.¹⁵ UNESCO holds that the right to education is a human right and indispensable for the exercise of other human rights. Other statements of UNESCO include:

1. Quality education aims to ensure the development of a fully-rounded human being.
2. It is one of the most powerful tools in lifting socially excluded children and adults out of poverty and into society.
3. UNESCO data shows that if all adults completed secondary education, globally the number of poor people could be reduced by more than half.

To UNESCO, the right to education entails:

1. A primary education that is free, compulsory and universal.
2. Secondary education, including technical and vocational, that is generally available, accessible to all and progressively free.

¹³ CRC, 1989, article 29 <ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child> accessed 26/03/25

¹⁴ African Youth Charter, 2006, Article 13.

¹⁵ UNESCO Digital Library, <<https://unesdoc.unesco.org>> ark: accessed 24/03/25



3. Higher education, accessible to all on the basis of individual capacity and progressively free.¹⁶

4.5 CFRN 1999 Constitution

Section 18 (1) of the 1999 constitution provides that ‘Government shall direct its policy towards ensuring that there are equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels’. There is also provision for free, compulsory and universal primary education and free junior secondary education.¹⁷ It is worthy of note that this section is not listed as a fundamental human right but falls under chapter II of the Constitution which is fundamental principles and directives of state policy and is not justiciable.

4.6 The Child Rights Act (CRA)

Nigeria is a signatory to the CRC and is therefore obligated to apply and enforce the provisions of that Convention. However, section 12 of 1999 Constitution provides that, to be applicable in Nigeria, international Conventions have to be domesticated. The CRA captures the essence of the CRC with a bit of country specific nuances.

The Child Rights Act provides that every child has the right to free, compulsory and universal basic education, and it is the duty of the government in Nigeria to provide such education.¹⁸ According to section 15(2) of the Act, basic education means primary school education and junior secondary education. Section 15(4) of the Child Right Act also provides that at the conclusion of basic education, a child who is not sent to senior secondary school, should be encouraged to learn an appropriate trade.

5.1 The Aim of Education

According to the CRC Committee general comment on education, article 29 (1) underlines the individual and subjective right to a specific quality of education. Consistent with the Convention’s emphasis on the importance of acting in the best interests of the child, this article emphasizes the message of child-centred education: that the key goal of education is the development of the individual child’s personality, talents and abilities, in recognition of the fact that every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities, and learning needs. Thus, the curriculum must be of direct relevance to the child’s social, cultural, environmental and economic context and to his or her present and future needs and take full account of the child’s evolving capacities; teaching methods should be tailored to the different needs of different children. Education must also be aimed at ensuring that essential life skills are learnt by every child and that no child leaves school without being equipped to face the challenges that he or she can expect to be confronted with in life. Basic skills include not only literacy and numeracy but also life skills such as the ability to make well-balanced decisions; to resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner; and to develop a healthy lifestyle, good social relationships and responsibility, critical thinking, creative talents, and other abilities which give children the tools needed to pursue their options in life.¹⁹

Article 29 (1) not only adds to the right to education recognized in article 28 a qualitative dimension which reflects the rights and inherent dignity of the child; it also insists upon the need for education to be child-centered, child-friendly and empowering, and it highlights the need for educational processes to be based upon the very principles it enunciates. The education to which every child has a right is one designed to provide the child with life skills, to strengthen the child’s capacity to enjoy the full range of human rights and to promote a

¹⁶ UNESCO, What You Need to know about the Right to Education, <Unesco.org/en/articles/what-you-need-know-about-right-education> accessed 24/02/25

¹⁷ Constitution of FRN, 1999, Section 18(3)(a)&(b)

¹⁸ CRA 2003, Section 15(1)

¹⁹ Para. 9, General Comment no. 1, (2001), Article 29(1): The Aims of Education<right-to-education.org/sites/right-to-education.org/files/resource-attachments> accessed 30/03/25



culture which is infused by appropriate human rights values. The goal is to empower the child by developing his or her skills, learning and other capacities, human dignity, self-esteem and self-confidence. “Education” in this context goes far beyond formal schooling to embrace the broad range of life experiences and learning processes which enable children, individually and collectively, to develop their personalities, talents and abilities and to live a full and satisfying life within society.²⁰

6.0 Conclusion

The writer readily agrees with the CRC Committee comments on the right to education that the goal of education is to empower the child by developing his or her skills, learning and other capacities, human dignity, self-esteem and self-confidence. “Education” in this context goes far beyond formal schooling to embrace the broad range of life experiences and learning processes which enable children, individually and collectively, to develop their personalities, talents and abilities and to live a full and satisfying life within society. A primary education which is very necessary and largely adequate in helping a child learn to read and write, learn basic arithmetic and quantitative reasoning is also enough to help some children succeed in life. All people should not be required to tow the academic line, other endeavors and different walks of life also possess the ability to foster a good life. The Igbo Apprenticeship System is a model of training that absorbs children between the ages of ten and fourteen, clearly when they are done with primary education. It is also a model whose indebt teaching, practice and experience cannot be gainsaid. It clearly not only matches but also surpasses any degree obtainable in business administration anywhere in the world due to its on hand practical nature. It is a complete educational package on its own and should not be impugned.

7.0 Recommendations

The Government should recognize this system as an educational package and treat it as such. The government should formalize this system and create an agency to oversee its operations. Any child who succeeds in completing the apprenticeship should receive a certificate with the same value as a Diploma in Business Administration. Section 15(2) & (4) of the CRA should be amended to either confine compulsory basic education to primary education or enter an exception for children being absorbed into Igba boyi model of apprenticeship.

²⁰ Ibid, para. 2