



From Classroom to Citizenship: Education Policy Reform and the Rebuilding of Political Trust in Nigeria

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Abstract

Political trust remains a major challenge confronting democratic governance in Nigeria amid persistent corruption, insecurity, electoral distrust, and weak institutional accountability. Although education policy discussions often emphasize economic development and workforce preparation, less attention has been given to education's role in rebuilding democratic trust and active citizenship. This conceptual policy analysis examined how education reform can contribute to strengthening political trust through democratic schooling, civic education, and community-centered leadership. Drawing on Critical Pedagogy and Social Capital Theory, the paper argued that schools should function as democratic spaces that promote civic participation, accountability, inclusion, and social cohesion. Using critical document analysis, the study critiqued examination-centered and technocratic reforms that prioritize credentialism over citizenship formation. The paper concluded that rebuilding political trust in Nigeria requires participatory educational governance, inclusive civic education, localized leadership, and stronger school-community partnerships capable of fostering democratic engagement and responsible citizenship.

Subject Areas

Public Policy

Keywords

Political Trust, Education Policy Reform, Citizenship Education, Democratic Education, Nigeria, Community Leadership, Civic Engagement

1. Introduction

Political trust, as defined by [1] [2], encompasses the belief that government in-

stitutions, actors, policy documents, and practices exhibit fairness, transparency, and responsiveness to the community's needs. This fundamental element is crucial for the survival and stability of democratic societies. Citizens' confidence in public institutions influences civic participation, social cohesion, democratic legitimacy, and compliance with public policies [3]. In many developing democracies, however, declining political trust has emerged as a major governance concern. Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and one of its largest democracies, continues to confront persistent governance challenges, including corruption, electoral distrust, insecurity, socio-economic inequality, and weak institutional accountability [4] [5], all of which have contributed to declining public confidence in democratic institutions. These challenges have contributed to growing public disillusionment with political leadership and state institutions [4] [6].

Although political reforms and anti-corruption initiatives are often proposed as mechanisms for restoring public trust, less attention has been devoted to the role of education in cultivating democratic citizenship and rebuilding institutional legitimacy. Education extends beyond the transmission of academic knowledge and technical skills; it also shapes civic values, political consciousness, social responsibility, and democratic participation [7]. Schools serve as important sites for citizenship formation where students learn not only curriculum content but also norms of participation, dialogue, accountability, and collective responsibility.

In Nigeria, educational policy discourse has predominantly focused on expanding access, improving examination outcomes, addressing infrastructural deficits, enhancing teacher quality, and aligning education with labor market demands, often with less emphasis on democratic citizenship and civic engagement [8] [9]. While these concerns are important, insufficient attention has been paid to the democratic function of schooling and its capacity to rebuild political trust. The dominance of examination-oriented systems, centralized governance structures, and limited community participation has constrained the transformative potential of education in promoting democratic engagement and civic responsibility.

This paper argues that rebuilding political trust in Nigeria requires reimagining education policy as a democratic project that connects classroom experiences to active citizenship. Specifically, the paper argues that education policy reform should move beyond technocratic approaches, which prioritize expert-driven, data-based, and efficiency-oriented solutions with standardized outcomes, managerial control, and centralized decision-making [1]. Instead, it advocates for participatory, community-centered, and citizenship-oriented educational models that promote civic engagement and institutional trust.

The purpose of this conceptual policy analysis, therefore, is to examine how education policy reform can contribute to rebuilding political trust in Nigeria through civic education, community leadership, and democratic schooling. Democratic schooling is an educational philosophy that emphasizes collaborative inquiry, critical thinking, and participatory decision-making [7]. The paper addresses the following guiding questions: How does the current educational struc-

ture in Nigeria influence political trust and citizenship formation? What limitations exist within technocratic and examination-centered educational reforms? And how can democratic education and community-centered leadership, a collaborative leadership approach that engages community members in decision-making and problem-solving to promote shared ownership, inclusion, and collective responsibility for educational and social improvement [10], contribute to rebuilding political trust in Nigeria? By integrating insights from Critical Pedagogy and Social Capital Theory, the paper contributes to scholarship on education, democratic development, and governance in African contexts. It further offers policy recommendations for reimagining Nigerian education as a mechanism for democratic renewal and social transformation.

2. Contextual Background: Political Trust and Education in Nigeria

2.1. Political Trust Crisis in Nigeria

Nigeria's democratic journey has been shaped by complex historical, political, and socio-economic challenges. Since the return to democratic governance in 1999, the country has experienced recurring concerns related to corruption, electoral violence, insecurity, ethnic tensions, and weak institutional accountability [4] [5] [11]. Although democratic structures formally exist, many citizens continue to express low levels of confidence in government institutions and political leaders.

Corruption remains one of the most significant factors contributing to declining political trust in Nigeria [5]. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) consistently ranks Nigeria among countries facing significant corruption challenges, reflecting persistent concerns regarding public sector accountability and governance transparency [12]. Public perceptions of political corruption weaken confidence in government institutions and diminish citizens' willingness to engage in democratic processes [13]. Electoral controversies, allegations of vote-buying, and political violence further intensify skepticism regarding democratic institutions.

Youth disillusionment has also become increasingly visible in recent years. Movements such as the #EndSARS protests demonstrated growing frustration among young Nigerians regarding governance failures, police brutality, unemployment, and limited political accountability [14]. These developments highlight broader concerns about the relationship between citizenship, governance, and democratic legitimacy.

The erosion of political trust has important implications for democratic stability and national development. Citizens who distrust political institutions are less likely to participate constructively in civic processes, comply with public policies, or perceive governance systems as legitimate [15]. Consequently, rebuilding trust requires long-term institutional and social interventions that extend beyond political reforms alone.

2.2. Historical Evolution of Education Policy in Nigeria

The Nigerian education system has undergone multiple reforms since the colonial era. Colonial education policies primarily focused on producing administrative personnel and reinforcing colonial governance structures rather than cultivating democratic citizenship or local empowerment [16]. Following independence in 1960, education became increasingly linked to national development, modernization, and human capital formation.

One of the major reforms in Nigerian education was the introduction of the National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1977, which provided a comprehensive framework for national educational development and citizenship formation in post-colonial Nigeria [8] [17] and was later revised several times. The policy emphasized national unity, citizenship education, and equal educational opportunities. Subsequent reforms, including the Universal Basic Education (UBE) program introduced in 1999, aimed to expand educational access and improve literacy rates.

Despite these reforms, significant challenges remain within the education sector. Inadequate funding, teacher shortages, infrastructural deficits, examination malpractice, and regional inequalities continue to undermine educational quality [9]. Moreover, many educational reforms have emphasized examination performance and economic productivity while neglecting democratic participation and civic engagement.

The dominance of examination-centered educational cultures has been associated with rote memorization, credentialism, and diminished opportunities for critical inquiry, civic engagement, and democratic participation within schooling systems [18]-[20]. Students are often socialized into passive learning environments where obedience and memorization are prioritized over dialogue, creativity, and civic engagement. Such educational experiences may limit the development of democratic values and weaken students' capacity to engage critically with governance processes.

2.3. Education and Citizenship Formation

Education plays a significant role in shaping citizenship identities and democratic participation. Citizenship education involves preparing individuals to participate responsibly and actively in democratic societies through civic knowledge, critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and social responsibility [21] [22] article, *Critical Educational Curriculum: A Determinant of Academic Success*, offers a valuable perspective on the relationship between curriculum design and societal outcomes. It argues that curricula should foster critical thinking, civic responsibility, problem-solving, and active social engagement, [22] which are crucial for meaningful citizenship formation. This perspective is relevant to Nigeria's efforts to rebuild political trust, as schools shape democratic values and responsible citizenship. By encouraging learners to critically examine governance, accountability, and social justice, a critical curriculum can strengthen civic consciousness and empower students to become informed participants in democratic processes. [22] argues that

curriculum reforms that integrate critical pedagogical approaches may contribute to academic success, trust, participation, and confidence in public institutions.

In democratic societies, schools function not only as academic institutions but also as social spaces where students learn democratic norms such as participation, accountability, cooperation, and respect for diversity [23]. Through classroom interactions, student leadership opportunities, and participatory governance structures, schools can cultivate civic dispositions that influence broader democratic engagement.

In fact, school practices have a substantial impact on students' political attitudes and trust in public institutions. For instance, democratic schooling provides learners with practical experiences of democratic values, rather than theoretical learning [7] [24]. This approach fosters civic efficacy and social capital. Interestingly, when individuals perceive themselves as active participants in the democratic process, it fosters favorable attitudes towards democratic institutions and enhances their trust in the system. Consequently, as political trust is influenced by citizens' assessments of governance, democratic school practices that foster social relationships are instrumental in promoting trust [25] [26].

However, citizenship formation within Nigerian schools has often been constrained by hierarchical educational cultures, authoritarian teaching methods, and limited opportunities for student participation. Civic education subjects are frequently treated as theoretical components of the curriculum rather than practical democratic experiences. Consequently, students may graduate with a limited understanding of democratic participation, institutional accountability, and civic responsibility. Given Nigeria's ongoing governance challenges, reimagining education as a democratic institution becomes increasingly important. Strengthening political trust requires educational systems capable of fostering critical citizenship, community participation, and democratic engagement.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Political Trust and Democratic Stability

Political trust refers to citizens' confidence in political institutions, public officials, and governance systems [3]. Trust is essential for democratic governance because it enhances political legitimacy, social cohesion, and public cooperation. Citizens who trust political institutions are more likely to participate in civic processes, comply with laws, and support democratic norms.

Declining political trust, however, has become a global concern. Scholars argue that corruption, inequality, weak governance, and ineffective public institutions contribute significantly to institutional distrust [27]. In developing democracies, historical legacies of authoritarianism, ethnic conflict, and socio-economic instability may further undermine public confidence in governance systems. In African contexts, political trust is often shaped by perceptions of corruption, service delivery, and political inclusiveness [28]. Citizens' interactions with state institutions significantly influence their trust in democratic governance. Where institutions

are perceived as ineffective or exclusionary, political distrust tends to increase.

Nigeria exemplifies many of these challenges. Persistent corruption scandals, insecurity, unemployment, and governance failures have weakened institutional legitimacy and contributed to public dissatisfaction. Studies indicate that many Nigerians perceive political institutions as unresponsive and disconnected from citizens' needs [4].

3.2. Education as a Tool for Democratic Development

Education has long been viewed as central to democratic development and citizenship formation. [7] argued that democratic societies require educational systems that cultivate participation, dialogue, critical thinking, and collective responsibility. Education should therefore prepare individuals not only for economic productivity but also for democratic engagement.

[19] similarly emphasized the transformative potential of education in promoting critical consciousness and social empowerment. According to [19], oppressive educational systems reproduce inequality and passivity by treating students as passive recipients of information. In contrast, dialogical and participatory education encourages critical reflection and democratic participation.

Research suggests that civic education can positively influence political participation, democratic values, and institutional trust [29]. Schools that encourage student voice, collaborative learning, and civic engagement tend to foster stronger democratic attitudes among students.

However, educational systems dominated by examination-oriented practices and authoritarian structures may undermine democratic learning. Excessive emphasis on standardized testing and credentialism can discourage creativity, dialogue, and critical engagement [18]. Such environments may reproduce hierarchical power relations rather than cultivate democratic citizenship. Modern curriculum research shows that prioritizing exams over critical thinking, creativity, and democratic learning hinders students' academic development. [22] argues that curriculum structures significantly impact students' growth and warns that exam-driven systems may undermine broader educational goals like critical inquiry, civic competence, and active citizenship. In such contexts, teaching and learning may focus on test preparation rather than on developing reflective, socially responsible, and critically engaged learners. This concern aligns with broader debates in Nigerian education about balancing academic achievement with cultivating democratic values, problem-solving skills, and civic responsibility.

3.3. Education Policy Reform in African Contexts

Education policy reforms across Africa have frequently been shaped by global development agendas, international donor priorities, and policy borrowing from Western educational systems [30]. Since the post-independence era, many African governments have pursued educational reforms aimed at improving literacy, expanding access, strengthening human capital development, and promoting eco-

economic modernization. International organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, World Bank, and United Nations Children's Fund have played a significant role in shaping educational policies across Africa through financial support, technical assistance, capacity-building initiatives, and the promotion of global education agendas, including Education for All (EFA) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [31]-[33]. While these reforms have contributed to increased school enrollment and infrastructural expansion in many African countries, scholars argue that externally influenced reforms have often inadequately addressed local socio-cultural realities, democratic participation, and indigenous educational priorities [30] [34].

One of the major characteristics of educational reform in African contexts has been the adoption of policy borrowing and policy transfer mechanisms. Policy borrowing refers to the process through which countries adopt educational ideas, structures, or practices from other national contexts, often with the expectation that such reforms will produce similar outcomes [35]. Across Africa, governments have adopted reforms related to standardized testing, competency-based curricula, accountability systems, privatization, decentralization, and quality assurance frameworks modeled after Western educational systems. However, scholars caution that reforms transplanted without sufficient contextual adaptation frequently fail to respond effectively to local governance structures, socio-economic conditions, and citizenship needs, perpetuating colonialism in modern education [35] [36]. As a result, some educational reforms have produced tensions between global policy expectations and local educational realities.

Critics further argue that many contemporary educational reforms across Africa have increasingly prioritized economic competitiveness, workforce preparation, and measurable learning outcomes while paying less attention to democratic citizenship, civic engagement, and social transformation [37]. The growing emphasis on international benchmarking, standardized assessments, and performance indicators reflects broader neoliberal educational trends that frame education primarily as a tool for economic productivity rather than democratic development [18]. In many contexts, schools are evaluated according to examination performance, graduation rates, and labor market outcomes, often at the expense of critical thinking, participatory learning, and civic education. Consequently, educational systems may reproduce hierarchical structures and passive forms of citizenship rather than cultivate democratic participation and institutional trust.

In several African countries, including Ghana, these reforms have also reinforced centralized governance structures that limit meaningful community participation in educational decision-making [38]. Although decentralization policies have been introduced in some contexts, educational policymaking often remains concentrated within national ministries, donor agencies, and elite administrative structures [39]. Such centralized approaches may weaken local accountability and reduce opportunities for communities to shape educational priorities according to local needs and cultural contexts. In societies facing governance chal-

allenges and declining public trust, limited community involvement in educational governance may further contribute to institutional alienation and democratic disengagement.

Within the Nigerian context, educational reforms such as the Universal Basic Education (UBE) program have contributed significantly to expanding access to formal schooling since their introduction in 1999 [8] [9]. The UBE initiative sought to provide free and compulsory basic education while reducing illiteracy and educational inequality across the country. Despite these achievements, implementation challenges continue to undermine the effectiveness of educational reforms in Nigeria. Persistent issues related to inadequate funding, infrastructural deficits, teacher shortages, regional disparities, examination malpractice, and declining educational quality remain significant concerns [9]. Furthermore, centralized policy structures often constrain community participation and local accountability within educational governance systems [40].

The dominance of examination-centered educational cultures within many African educational systems, including Nigeria, has contributed to rote memorization, credentialism, constrained critical thinking, and limited opportunities for democratic engagement and participatory learning [19] [20] [41]. Students are frequently socialized into highly competitive and authoritarian educational environments where memorization and examination performance are prioritized over dialogue, creativity, and critical citizenship [41]. Such systems may inadequately prepare students for active democratic participation or civic leadership within complex political societies [18] [19]. As a result, scholars increasingly emphasize the need to reimagine educational reform beyond narrow economic and technocratic objectives.

Emerging scholarship on African education policy, therefore, advocates for contextually responsive and socially transformative educational reforms that integrate local knowledge systems, democratic participation, and community-centered leadership [37] [38]. [38] argues that contextually responsive reforms recognize that educational systems must align with local cultural realities, governance structures, and societal aspirations rather than simply replicate external models. Such approaches emphasize participatory governance, inclusive citizenship education, culturally relevant pedagogy, and stronger school-community partnerships as mechanisms for strengthening democratic engagement and institutional trust.

These reforms are particularly important in African societies experiencing political instability, governance crises, and declining public confidence in state institutions. Educational systems capable of fostering critical consciousness, civic participation, and social accountability can contribute meaningfully to democratic renewal and nation-building. Consequently, educational reform in African contexts should not merely focus on access and economic productivity but also on cultivating democratic citizenship, participatory leadership, and social cohesion.

3.4. Youth, Citizenship, and Civic Participation

Given that young people constitute a substantial proportion of Nigeria's popula-

tion, their participation in civic engagement, democratic governance, and political accountability remains essential to the country's democratic development and social transformation [14] [42]. Nigeria possesses one of the largest youth populations in Africa, with young people constituting a substantial proportion of the country's total population [42] [43]. This creates both significant democratic opportunities and complex socio-political challenges.

Youth populations often represent important drivers of innovation, political change, and civic mobilization within emerging democracies. Consequently, the extent to which young people are empowered to participate meaningfully in democratic processes has important implications for governance legitimacy, institutional trust, and national development. Despite their demographic significance, many Nigerian youths continue to experience unemployment, poverty, economic marginalization, and political exclusion [14]. Youth unemployment and underemployment remain persistent concerns that contribute to socio-economic insecurity and frustration among young people [14]. In many cases, limited economic opportunities intersect with perceptions of corruption, weak governance, and elite domination of political institutions, further deepening distrust toward the state.

Scholars argue that when young people perceive political systems as unresponsive, exclusionary, or inequitable, they may become disengaged from formal democratic processes or skeptical about the effectiveness of political participation [44]. Political exclusion also manifests through limited youth representation in leadership structures and policymaking processes. Despite constituting a major demographic and electoral force, Nigerian youth continue to face structural barriers to political representation and remain significantly underrepresented in formal governance and decision-making institutions [14] [45]. This disconnect between demographic representation and political influence has contributed to growing demands for inclusion, transparency, and accountability.

The passage of the "Not Too Young To Run" Act in 2018 [46] reflected broader efforts to expand political participation opportunities for younger generations and reduce structural barriers to youth leadership. Despite these challenges, Nigerian youth have increasingly demonstrated political agency through activism, digital engagement, and social movements [14]. The #EndSARS (Special Anti-Robbery Squad) protests, which gained national and international attention in 2020, represented one of the most significant youth-led democratic movements in recent Nigerian history [14]. These developments highlight changing forms of civic participation among younger generations and underscore the importance of political consciousness, digital literacy, and democratic agency in modern governance contexts.

Educational institutions play a major role in shaping youth civic engagement, democratic participation, and political consciousness. Schools serve not only as spaces for academic instruction but also as sites for citizenship formation and socialization. Through civic education, student leadership opportunities, collaborative learning, and democratic participation, educational institutions can cultivate

civic responsibility, critical thinking, and social accountability [7]. Students who experience participatory and inclusive learning environments may develop stronger democratic values and greater trust in civic institutions. However, educational systems dominated by examination-oriented and authoritarian practices may constrain democratic learning and civic participation. When schools prioritize rote memorization, obedience, and credential acquisition over dialogue, creativity, and critical inquiry, students may have limited opportunities to develop democratic competencies and participatory skills [19].

Recent evidence shows that civic learning experiences positively impact youth political attitudes and democratic engagement in Nigeria. [40] found that Lagos State secondary school students with higher political knowledge and stronger democratic norms were more likely to vote, contact political representatives, and engage in lawful political action. This challenges the concern that increased political awareness may lead to disengagement, as knowledgeable and democratic students rejected corrupt politics while supporting democratic participation. Civic education can strengthen democratic attitudes by fostering political efficacy, democratic values, and informed public engagement.

Consequently, educational reforms aimed at strengthening democratic citizenship should encourage participatory pedagogy, critical civic education, debate, leadership development, and experiential learning opportunities. Such experiences can strengthen political efficacy, civic confidence, and institutional trust. In societies facing governance challenges and declining political trust, investing in youth civic education becomes increasingly important for democratic sustainability. Nigerian youth possess significant potential to contribute to democratic renewal, social transformation, and accountable governance. Strengthening educational systems that promote critical consciousness, participatory citizenship, and democratic leadership may therefore play a central role in fostering stronger civic cultures and rebuilding political trust, which is the focus of the conceptual review.

3.5. Community Participation and Local Educational Governance

Community participation is increasingly recognized as essential for effective educational governance, democratic accountability, and sustainable school improvement. Educational institutions do not operate in isolation; rather, they are embedded within broader social, cultural, and political communities. Consequently, the involvement of parents, local leaders, civil society organizations, and community stakeholders in educational decision-making can significantly influence school effectiveness, accountability, and public trust [47]. School-community partnerships strengthen local ownership of education by encouraging shared responsibility for educational outcomes and fostering stronger relationships between citizens and institutions.

Research on school governance in Nigeria emphasizes the importance of participatory structures but also reveals persistent barriers to inclusive decision-making. In a qualitative study of School-Based Management Committees (SBMCs) in

Niger State, [48] found that sociocultural norms, age hierarchies, traditional power structures, and limited participatory cultures constrained youth involvement in school governance. Despite SBMCs' design to promote community participation, young people were often marginalized because adult members dominated discussions and decision-making [48]. The study shows that democratic school governance requires addressing cultural and institutional barriers that limit stakeholder voice and inclusion. These findings support the argument that democratic schooling depends on creating genuinely participatory environments where diverse stakeholders can meaningfully contribute to educational governance [48].

Participatory educational leadership promotes collaboration among teachers, parents, students, and community stakeholders in shaping school policies, governance structures, and educational priorities. Such approaches align closely with democratic principles because they encourage transparency, inclusiveness, dialogue, and shared decision-making [49]. In participatory governance systems, communities are not merely passive recipients of educational policies but active contributors to educational planning and implementation. This collaborative approach can improve accountability by ensuring that educational institutions remain responsive to local needs and societal expectations. Research suggests that schools characterized by strong community involvement often demonstrate improved educational outcomes, stronger institutional legitimacy, and higher levels of stakeholder trust [40] [47]. Parents and community members who actively participate in school governance are more likely to support educational initiatives, monitor school performance, and contribute to resource mobilization [40].

Within democratic societies, participatory educational governance also contributes to citizenship formation and civic engagement. When students observe collaboration, dialogue, and accountability within school leadership structures, they are exposed to democratic practices that may influence broader civic attitudes and political participation [7]. Schools, therefore, serve not only as academic institutions but also as spaces where democratic norms and social responsibility are practiced. In many African contexts, however, centralized governance systems continue to limit meaningful community participation in educational policymaking and implementation. Educational decision-making often remains concentrated within national ministries, bureaucratic structures, and external donor agencies, leaving limited opportunities for local stakeholders to influence policies affecting their schools and communities [39] [50]. Such centralized approaches may weaken local accountability and contribute to perceptions of institutional distance and exclusion. In the Nigerian context, educational governance structures have historically reflected centralized administrative traditions inherited from colonial and postcolonial governance systems. Although decentralization reforms and school-based management initiatives have been introduced in some regions, according to [39], many communities continue to experience limited participation in educational planning and resource allocation. Reimagining educational governance through localized and participatory leadership structures may

therefore strengthen both educational effectiveness and democratic trust. Decentralized governance systems that empower local stakeholders can foster stronger accountability, responsiveness, and institutional legitimacy. Community participation may also contribute to greater trust in educational institutions by creating opportunities for dialogue, collective problem-solving, and shared ownership of educational reforms. Consequently, strengthening school-community partnerships and localized educational leadership should be viewed not only as educational reforms but also as important strategies for democratic renewal and social transformation

4. Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on Critical Pedagogy and Social Capital Theory to examine the relationship between education policy reform and political trust in Nigeria.

4.1. Critical Pedagogy

Critical Pedagogy, associated primarily with [19], views education as a transformative and political process. Freire criticized traditional “banking” models of education in which students passively receive information from teachers. According to Freire, such educational systems reinforce oppression, passivity, and inequality. Instead, Critical Pedagogy advocates dialogical, participatory, and emancipatory forms of education that encourage critical consciousness and social transformation. Through dialogue, reflection, and collective action, learners become active participants in shaping society rather than passive recipients of authority.

This framework is particularly relevant for analyzing education and political trust in Nigeria because it highlights how educational structures can either reproduce political passivity or cultivate democratic participation. Examination-oriented and authoritarian educational systems may reinforce hierarchical power relations and discourage critical citizenship. Conversely, participatory educational practices may foster civic engagement, democratic consciousness, and institutional accountability. Critical Pedagogy also emphasizes the importance of contextualized education that reflects local realities and empowers marginalized communities. In the Nigerian context, this perspective supports calls for community-centered educational reforms and participatory governance structures.

4.2. Social Capital Theory

Social Capital Theory provides an additional lens for understanding how education can contribute to rebuilding political trust. According to [15], social capital refers to networks, trust, and norms of reciprocity that facilitate cooperation and democratic participation within societies. [15] contends that democratic societies function more effectively when citizens trust one another and participate actively in civic institutions. Educational institutions can contribute to social capital development by fostering collaboration, civic engagement, and shared democratic values. Schools serve as important sites for building social trust and civic net-

works. Participatory school cultures, collaborative leadership structures, and strong school-community partnerships can strengthen relationships between citizens and institutions.

In contexts characterized by institutional distrust and political fragmentation, strengthening social capital becomes particularly important. This Social Capital framework, therefore, helps explain how democratic educational reforms may contribute to rebuilding political trust and social cohesion in Nigeria. Together, Critical Pedagogy and Social Capital Theory provide complementary perspectives for examining education as both a transformative democratic process and a mechanism for strengthening civic trust and participation.

5. Methodology

This study employs a conceptual policy analysis approach grounded in critical document analysis. Conceptual policy analysis is appropriate for examining how educational policies, institutional structures, and democratic practices influence political trust and citizenship formation. Critical document analysis involves systematic examination of policy documents, scholarly literature, institutional reports, and educational frameworks to identify underlying assumptions, power relations, and implications for policy and practice [51].

The review drew on a purposive selection of policy documents, institutional reports, and peer-reviewed scholarly literature relevant to education reform, civic education, political trust, and democratic citizenship in Nigeria. Key sources included Nigeria's National Policy on Education, Universal Basic Education (UBE) policy documents, civic education curriculum frameworks, reports from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), UNESCO, and other international development organizations, as well as scholarly studies on educational reform, democratic governance, citizenship education, political trust, and African education systems. Sources were identified through searches of academic databases, including Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus, and Web of Science, using keywords such as *education policy reform*, *political trust*, *civic education*, *democratic citizenship*, *community leadership*, *Nigeria*, and *African educational reform*. Additional documents were identified through reference-list searches of relevant publications.

Documents were included if they: 1) focused on Nigerian education policy, citizenship education, political trust, democratic participation, or community engagement; 2) provided empirical, conceptual, or policy-relevant insights related to educational reform and governance; and 3) were published by recognized academic, governmental, or international organizations. Sources that lacked direct relevance to the study's focus or did not provide sufficient discussion of education-policy implications were excluded.

The analysis followed an iterative thematic process. Documents were first read and reviewed to identify recurring concepts and policy narratives. Relevant information was then coded according to key areas of inquiry, including educational governance, civic education, democratic participation, political trust, community

engagement, accountability, and policy reform. Through constant comparison across documents, broader themes were developed concerning the relationship between educational structures and citizenship formation, the limitations of technocratic and examination-centered reforms, and opportunities for democratic and community-centered educational transformation. The conceptual and interpretive nature of the analysis enabled critical engagement with existing policies and practices while generating recommendations for strengthening political trust through educational reform in Nigeria.

5.1. Analysis and Discussion

This section critically examines how education policy reform in Nigeria intersects with democratic citizenship, civic participation, and political trust. Drawing on Critical Pedagogy and Social Capital Theory, the discussion analyzes the limitations of examination-centered and technocratic educational reforms while exploring the potential of democratic schooling, civic education, youth engagement, and community-centered leadership to strengthen institutional legitimacy and democratic accountability. The section further argues that reimagining educational governance through participatory and contextually responsive approaches may contribute not only to improved educational outcomes but also to broader democratic renewal and the rebuilding of political trust in Nigeria.

5.2. The Limits of Technocratic Education Reform

Critical Pedagogy advocates dialogical, participatory, and emancipatory forms of education that encourage critical consciousness and social transformation. It criticizes the traditional “banking” model of education, where students passively receive information from teachers. Educational reforms in Nigeria have frequently emphasized technocratic objectives such as examination performance, workforce preparation, standardized testing, and quantitative educational indicators [8] [9] [37]. While these goals are important for national development, they often neglect the democratic and civic dimensions of education. Critical Pedagogy Theory posits that it is through dialogue, reflection, and collective action that learners become active participants in shaping society rather than passive recipients of authority.

Examination-oriented educational systems tend to prioritize memorization, credential acquisition, and competition over critical thinking, democratic participation, and civic engagement [18] [41]. Students are often evaluated primarily based on examination outcomes rather than their ability to engage critically with social and political issues. This examination culture may inadvertently reinforce passive forms of citizenship. It should be noted that students socialized into authoritarian and test-centered learning environments may have limited opportunities to practice democratic participation, dialogue, and collective problem-solving. Such educational experiences may contribute to political disengagement and institutional distrust. Furthermore, technocratic reforms frequently adopt top-down policy approaches that limit local participation and community ownership.

Educational policies designed without meaningful stakeholder engagement may weaken trust between citizens and institutions.

Critics have also argued that excessive reliance on standardized testing can reproduce educational inequalities and marginalize local knowledge systems [18]. In Nigeria, disparities in school resources, teacher quality, and infrastructure mean that examination-centered systems often disproportionately disadvantage marginalized communities. Consequently, educational reform must move beyond narrow technocratic priorities toward broader democratic and citizenship-oriented goals.

5.3. Reimagining Schools as Democratic Spaces

Critical Pedagogy views school as a democratic space and argues that it should move beyond authoritarian and passive models of instruction toward participatory and socially transformative educational practices that empower students to question inequality and engage actively in democratic life. In this sense, when students experience inclusive and participatory educational environments, they are more likely to develop a sense of agency, civic responsibility, and confidence in democratic institutions. Thus, democratic schooling not only promotes academic learning but also contributes to the formation of critically conscious citizens capable of participating meaningfully in processes of social justice and democratic transformation.

Since democratic societies require educational institutions that model democratic values and practices, schools should therefore function as spaces where students actively participate in dialogue, collaboration, and decision-making. Reimagining schools as democratic spaces involves transforming classroom relationships, pedagogical practices, and institutional governance structures. Critical Pedagogy views education as a political and emancipatory process that encourages participatory teaching dialogue, critical reflection, and collaborative learning that can help students develop democratic dispositions and civic confidence. Furthermore, opportunities for student leadership, school councils, and participatory decision-making allow students to experience democratic practices firsthand. Such experiences can strengthen civic responsibility, accountability, and institutional trust as advanced by [7].

Teachers also play a crucial role in democratic education. Rather than functioning solely as authority figures, teachers should facilitate dialogue, critical inquiry, and civic engagement. Professional development programs should therefore prepare teachers to support democratic learning environments.

It should be emphasized that democratic schooling requires inclusive educational cultures that respect diversity and promote social justice. Students who experience fairness, participation, and inclusion within schools may develop stronger trust in broader democratic institutions than those who do not. From the perspective of Critical Pedagogy, educational institutions should function as emancipatory spaces that challenge oppression, encourage dialogue, and cultivate critical

consciousness among learners [19].

5.4. Civic Education and Political Trust

From the standpoint of Social Capital Theory, civic education represents one of the most direct ways through which educational systems can influence political trust. Effective civic education goes beyond teaching constitutional structures or political facts. Instead, it encompasses the utilization of networks, trust, and norms of reciprocity that facilitate cooperation and democratic participation within societies. Furthermore, it fosters critical thinking, ethical reasoning, democratic participation, and social responsibility.

In Nigeria, civic education has been included within school curricula, yet implementation challenges remain. Civic education is often taught through rote memorization rather than experiential and participatory approaches. Students may therefore learn about democratic principles theoretically without developing practical civic competencies. To imbibe in students and citizens the practical democratic initiatives, such as experiential civic learning approaches, debates, community service, participatory projects, and student governance, can strengthen democratic engagement and political efficacy. Such activities allow students to practice democratic participation and develop confidence in collective action.

Research suggests that citizens who perceive institutions as fair, participatory, and accountable are more likely to trust them [3]. It could therefore be said that schools that model transparency, participation, and inclusiveness may contribute to broader institutional trust. Additionally, civic education should address contemporary social and political realities relevant to Nigerian youth, including corruption, social justice, human rights, digital citizenship, and democratic accountability. Contextually relevant civic education can strengthen students' sense of agency and civic responsibility.

From the perspective of Social Capital Theory, these democratic school practices help cultivate networks of trust, reciprocity, civic engagement, and collective responsibility that are essential for effective democratic societies [15]. Schools function as important social institutions where students learn patterns of cooperation, participation, and mutual accountability that may extend into broader civic and political life. When educational environments encourage inclusive participation and collaborative decision-making, they contribute to the development of social capital by strengthening interpersonal trust and civic norms. Such experiences may enhance young people's confidence in democratic institutions and increase their willingness to participate constructively in governance and community life.

5.5. Community Leadership and Local Accountability

Social Capital Theory posits that connections among citizens, community leaders, educational institutions, and local organizations facilitate cooperation and accountability. This concept is crucial in community-centered educational leadership, which emphasizes rebuilding trust between institutions and citizens. Schools

that actively engage parents, local leaders, civil society organizations, and community stakeholders are more likely to foster accountability and social cohesion. These supports [47], who argues that community participation in school can significantly influence school effectiveness, accountability, and public trust. Participatory educational governance aligns with democratic principles by decentralizing decision-making and strengthening local ownership. Community involvement in school management can improve transparency, responsiveness, and public confidence.

In many Nigerian communities, however, educational governance remains highly centralized [39]. In this case, decisions regarding curriculum, funding, and administration are often made with limited local participation. Such structures may reinforce perceptions of institutional distance and exclusion. Strengthening community leadership within education requires creating formal mechanisms for stakeholder participation, including school governing boards, parent associations, and community advisory councils, as documented by [40]. These structures should move beyond symbolic participation toward meaningful collaborative decision-making.

Community-centered approaches also recognize the importance of local knowledge systems and cultural contexts. Educational reforms that integrate local realities and community priorities may strengthen institutional legitimacy and public trust. Moreover, collaboration between schools and communities can support broader democratic development by encouraging collective problem-solving, civic participation, and shared accountability.

5.6. Youth Agency and Democratic Renewal

According to Critical Pedagogy Theory, youth embody both the future of Nigerian democracy and a significant catalyst for democratic renewal. Consequently, educational institutions assume a crucial role in shaping youth political consciousness and fostering democratic participation.

Recent youth-led movements in Nigeria—SARS—demonstrate growing demands for accountability, transparency, and social justice. However, persistent unemployment, exclusion, and governance failures continue to contribute to frustration and distrust among young people. Educational reform should therefore prioritize youth empowerment and civic agency. Schools should encourage critical inquiry, leadership development, and social participation rather than passive conformity.

Digital citizenship education is also increasingly important within contemporary democratic societies. Social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp have become significant spaces for political engagement, activism, civic mobilization, and public discourse among Nigerian youth, as put forward by [14]. Recent youth-led movements, including the #EndSARS protests, demonstrated how digital technologies can facilitate political awareness, collective action, and demands for accountability and social justice [14]. Through these platforms, young people are able to exchange ideas, chal-

lenge political narratives, organize civic campaigns, and participate in national conversations beyond traditional institutional structures. Despite these benefits, digital spaces also present challenges related to misinformation, political manipulation, online harassment, hate speech, and the spread of extremist content.

Nevertheless, educational systems should prepare students to engage responsibly, ethically, and critically within digital democratic spaces. Digital citizenship education should therefore include media literacy, critical evaluation of online information, ethical online behavior, democratic dialogue, digital rights, and responsible civic participation. Equipping students with these competencies can strengthen informed political participation, critical consciousness, and democratic accountability in increasingly digitalized societies. By empowering youth as active citizens rather than passive recipients of authority, educational institutions can contribute to democratic renewal and stronger political trust.

6. Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this conceptual analysis offer several implications for educational policy and democratic development in Nigeria. Firstly, the Federal Government, responsible for education policy reform, should, through the Federal Ministry of Education, extend its focus beyond examination performance and workforce preparation to encompass democratic citizenship and civic engagement as fundamental educational objectives. Policymakers should recognize schools as democratic institutions that contribute to nation-building and social cohesion.

Secondly, the State Ministry of Education, responsible for secondary education, should ensure that civic education curricula are strengthened through participatory and experiential learning approaches. Rather than relying solely on rote instruction, civic education should incorporate debates, service learning, collaborative projects, student leadership opportunities, and community engagement.

Thirdly, the State Ministry of Education should structure educational governance to become more participatory and community-centered. This will enable school-level leadership to establish meaningful mechanisms for parent, student, and community involvement in decision-making processes. Decentralized governance structures may enhance accountability and local trust.

Fourthly, teacher education programs should prepare educators to facilitate democratic learning environments. Teachers require professional development in participatory pedagogy, critical thinking instruction, conflict resolution, and inclusive educational practices.

Fifthly, the Federal Ministry of Education should prioritize the implementation of educational policies that promote inclusion, equity, and social justice. This approach is essential in addressing the disparity in educational opportunities between affluent and low-income students. It should be emphasized that students who experience fairness and inclusion within educational institutions are more likely to develop trust in broader democratic systems.

Sixthly, both the Federal and State Ministries of Education should ensure that

youth participation is integrated into educational policymaking and governance structures. Young people should be recognized not merely as beneficiaries of education but also as active contributors to democratic development.

Finally, each of the federal, state, and school-level policymakers should encourage stronger partnerships among schools, civil society organizations, local communities, and democratic institutions. Collaborative educational leadership can strengthen social capital and promote sustainable democratic development.

7. Conclusions

Political trust remains essential for democratic stability, social cohesion, and national development. In Nigeria, persistent governance challenges, corruption, inequality, and institutional distrust continue to undermine democratic legitimacy and civic engagement. This paper has argued that rebuilding political trust requires more than political reforms and anti-corruption campaigns; it also requires educational transformation. Schools are not merely sites for academic instruction or workforce preparation but also democratic institutions that shape citizenship, participation, and social responsibility.

Using Critical Pedagogy and Social Capital Theory, the paper demonstrated how examination-centered and technocratic educational systems may reinforce passivity and institutional distrust. Conversely, democratic schooling, participatory governance, civic education, and community-centered leadership can contribute to stronger civic engagement and political trust.

Reimagining education in Nigeria, therefore, involves reconnecting classrooms to citizenship through participatory learning, inclusive governance, and democratic engagement. Educational reform should cultivate critical consciousness, youth agency, community participation, and social accountability.

Ultimately, rebuilding political trust in Nigeria requires long-term democratic investments that begin within educational institutions. By transforming schools into spaces of participation, dialogue, accountability, and civic empowerment, education policy reform can contribute meaningfully to democratic renewal and sustainable national development. That's to say, education policy reform in Nigeria must move beyond technocratic schooling reforms toward democratic, participatory, and citizenship-oriented education capable of rebuilding political trust and strengthening civic engagement. Therefore, sustainable democratic trust in Nigeria cannot be rebuilt solely through political reforms; it requires educational reforms that cultivate civic consciousness, participatory leadership, and community ownership of schooling.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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