Recasting Success in Personal, Local and National Moulds: Voices from Bayelsa, Nigeria

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Abstract

Purpose/Aim: This paper explores the meaning of success from the perspectives of some young adults in the 18-25 age range, in Yenagoa, Nigeria.

Design Methodology: The paper employs a qualitative approach. It draws from data collected from 90 respondents by employing this overarching question: *What does success means to you?*

Findings: A general summing-up of the responses shows that success is linked to personal, local and national goals. The attainment of academic and vocational qualification, does not feature in the responses.

Conclusion: There is a need for educators to redefine success, with a view to engaging students in meaningful experiences that can boost personal development, community development and national development.

Limitations: This study makes use of a single research question. The analysis is therefore limited in scope. The qualitative approach taken, is but a precursor to a mixed methodology study.

Implications: Redefining success has implications for education systems, educators, curriculum developers and policy makers.

Originality: From the literature reviewed, this seems to be the first study in Nigeria that explores the meaning of success against the backdrop of the tension that exists between academic and vocational qualification.

Keywords: academic qualification, vocational education, career development, national development, self-worth

Introduction

This paper explores a complex concept – *success.* It examines success through the lens of some young adults in the 18-25 age range, in Yenagoa, Nigeria. To a great extent, *success* is associated with academic achievement and it is widely used to frame discussions that relate to Ministries of Education's (MoE) affairs, including policy formula-

tion, curriculum development, teaching and learning, assessment or research activities. Students who have gained academic achievement because of their adjudged learning abilities are generally taken to be successful (Novo and Calixto, 2009). When the word academic is added to success it becomes more provocative since it is now directed to achievement that is linked to particular educational experiences, thus making success more complex to conceptualise and equally thorny to operationalize from learner satisfaction point of view. Yet, repeatedly, success is associated with any circumstance that is linked to learner outcome. Obviously, learners are different. They possess various capabilities, diverse learning techniques and many approaches to how they learn; and these are all based on individual lived experiences. Differences are also noted in individually developed skills and talents, inherent characteristics and social upbringing (Yahaya, n.d.). Besides, learners learn at their own pace. However, these realities are hardly, if ever, taken into consideration when educators and others make reference to academic achievement, or who is deemed to be successful.

In spite of the prevalence of this position, based on the data collected, the paper locates *success* in a much wider perimeter. It should be noted that the deductions made here are not conclusive for two main reasons: (1) This paper is but an overview of the responses; and (2) An in depth analysis will be undertaken and presented as the research unfolds. In fact, the general assessment that is presented here, is based on four of the twelve initial themes used to categorise participants' perceptions of success. This initial step was taken to get participants' understandings of how they view success. Nevertheless, the assumptions made are weighty enough to influence reasonable inferences. The paper provides a context for the discussion and the reason behind the study, explains the methodology used for data collection, presents a general analysis of the findings, before making some concluding statements.

Contextual Framework and Background

There are two strands that frame the context of this paper. The first has to do with pedagogy and its related practices. This position is inspired by the tenets of the *Redesigning Pedagogy* biennial international conferences, hosted by the National Institute of Education (NIE), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. The second links to the general low perceptions that some people have of vocational programmes.

Pedagogy
There are a number of features that come together to represent pedagogy. This is not surprising since it is mainly connected to what educators do to inspire learners to learn; and what educators do are linked to a variety of other features. Kapur (2020) identifies some of the factors that characterise pedagogy: "theories, research evidence, political drivers, evidence from practice, individual and group reflection, educator's experience and expertise, community expectations and requirements". All of these factors play a significant role in pedagogical practices. However, this paper draws attention to the instructional techniques that are employed.

Redesigning Pedagogy Conferences: There is a strong focus on educators and educational activities at all of the *Redesigning Pedagogy* conferences. The Conference Secretariat notes that all conferences bear this purpose: "…to provide a global platform for researchers, educational leaders, practitioners, and policymakers to collectively debate and generate creative solutions, and to actively exchange research and educational ideas and experiences between and across local, regional and international educational communities" (NIE, 2021). Unmistakably, no one involved in educational activities, is excluded from this global debate that the conferences engender. Although the word teacher is not directly mentioned here, teachers are right at the heart of the deliberations because they are researchers, leaders and practitioners. Corsenza (2015,

p.79) sees teacher leadership not only as a key ingredient to a school's success, but also as vital to their professionalism. Teacher leadership is also seen as crucial to students' success, since they are engaged in decision-making exercises that affect students' lives (Dozier, 2007; Donaldson, 2006). And as researchers, teachers are provided with a platform from which their voices can be heard (Ilisko, Ignatjeva and Micule (2010, p.51).

The futuristic global outlook taken at these conferences is rather instructive. A look at some selected themes underscores this. Below are the themes for 2020, 2017, 2015 and 2011 Redesigning Pedagogy, conferences, respectively:

Educating for Innovation, Nurturing for Society;
Education for the Future: Creativity, Innovation and Values and Leaders;
Values and Citizenship in the 21st Century Education; and
Transforming Teaching, Inspiring Learning.

The themes are highlighted to demonstrate the innovative direction in which conference participants have been directed to look. NIE's first Redesigning Pedagogy conference was held in 2005. From that time onward, conference organisers have not failed "to forge new and innovative directions in educational research and practices that may significantly impact the education system in Singapore and abroad" (NIE, 2011).

Clearly, the importance of the need to continually reformat and reshape pedagogy has not been lost on the educators at NIE. From 2005 onwards, successive themes have emphasised the need to redesign pedagogy, not simply on a national scale, but on a level that takes into consideration the changing global educational landscapes. Other educators also see the need for improving their pedagogical practices. Consider this example: In 2011, Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, Pennsylvania, convened summer workshops for all faculty. Participation was entirely voluntary, but faculty members chose to participate although they were pleased with their work and they were relatively successful. Yet, they wanted to:

"… engage in dialogue with other faculty about expanding their pedagogical approaches; they have been teaching for many years and want to try something new; they are frustrated with certain aspects of their teaching; they want to develop a new course or revise an existing one… (Cook-Sather, 2011, p.1).

From the foregoing admission, it seems fair to say that they had a positive attitude towards the restructuring of pedagogy; and that they are willing to make changes to their practices whenever the need arises.

Educators at all levels (pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary) of education systems should keep learners at the heart of their pedagogical practices. The bottom line is, educators should always choose teaching resources and techniques that can contribute to a healthy learning environment, thereby motivating learners to learn. Educators should always be ready to expand their content to include national, regional and international happenings. Kapur (2020) makes this observation: "Within the course of time, it is necessary to make use of modern, scientific and pioneering methods in the pedagogical practices". Kapur also reminds that any changes made should be conducive to the learners' progress, and by extension successful outcomes.

Perceptions of Vocational Education

Conventionally, there is a belief that educational outcomes springs from two discreet strands – academic and vocational. The development of knowledge is associated with academic courses, whereas the development of abilities to complete certain projects, is linked to vocational courses (Tlapana and Myeki, 2020; Lolwana, 2016; Smithers, 2010). This stance has attracted various reactions in countries around the world. Two

countries immediately comes to mind – Germany and Switzerland. In these two countries, vocational education in highly respected possibly because of its positive link to employment. Comparatively, Smithers (2010) note that in Britain, there is no clear purpose with regard to the opportunities that vocational education offers. In South Africa, Tlapana and Myeki (2020) investigated the expectations and perceptions of students towards Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions at the Buffalo City Metro. They found that 77% of students would rather go to a comprehensive university than choose any other mode of Higher Education, which led them to conclude that the students prefer comprehensive over TVET colleges.

Lolwana (2016), who has researched TVET in Sub-Saharan Africa, extends the question of perception to the issue of size, by noting that size does not equate to strength. However, Lolwana notes that small-sized TVET colleges are inclined to be weak for various reasons, including a weak teaching core, funding investments and institutional capacity. Also, employment opportunities for students who graduate from these institutions are not forthcoming. Lolwana further draws attention to what students and parents have concluded. They see the quality of these institutions "… as being weak, not fulfilling their promise and they therefore vote with their feet and walk away as they see them as poverty traps" (Lolwana, 2016, p.19).

To pick up on the Lolwana's *weak institution* remark, the situation in Nigeria is quite similar. Okwelle and Deebom note: "… vocational programme in Nigeria has been bedeviled by inadequate supply of facilities and equipment necessary for acquiring skills and competencies for self-employment" (2017, p.36). But institutions' weaknesses go beyond the inadequate supply of resources. Ojo (n.d.) extends this position to include the Nigerian society's poor perceptions of vocational programmes. He made reference to this Amoor's (2009) allusion: "… most parents do not encourage or guide their wards to take a course in vocational education programme". The reason given for this reluctance is that the society "does not place any significant value or dignity on the programmes". Put another way, there is no respect and recognition given to the students who have graduated from these vocational programmes. A widely held impression is: "… this type of education is meant for the unintelligent and underachievers" (ibid). This is the kind of environment that participants of the research experience their educational growth and development.

The Motivation Behind the Research

The literature that was studied, makes reference to the degree of prejudice that is evident from comparisons made between students who follow the so-called academic route and those who pursue vocational education, which are 'pushed' on them because they are deemed unfit to pursue academic studies (Machin et al, 2020; Rose, 2014; Backes-Gellner and Geel, 2014). The 'unfair' distinction is worrying. Given that educators are encouraged to continue to redesign pedagogy in its broadest sense, it follows then that they should be also redesigning *what constitutes success.* Evidently, there is a need for educational institutions to view the entire pedagogical spectrum through a remodelled set of success lens.

Africa has been referred to as a nation of entrepreneurs. Bayelsa State, one of the newest Nigerian states, has numerous natural resources. Gentle and Onuoha (2018, p.581) note that Bayelsa produces over 30% of Nigeria's internally generated revenue. Generally, as entrepreneurs, residents of Bayelsa are expected to be innovative, self-directed and proactive. This suggests that in some way, however small, they have attained a level of success. However, entrepreneurial prowess aside, young adults from Bayelsa State have grown up in a society that generally views student success within a certain enclosure; that is, graduating from an academic institution rather than from TVET colleges (Okwelle and Deebom, 2017; Ojo, n.d.). The authors contend that suc-

cess resides in a wider domain and wanted to get the opinion of a selected group of young adults from Yenagoa, Bayelsa, hence this research work.

Research Approach

The qualitative approach was employed for this stage of the research. It is the exploratory stage that sought to get the perceptions of selected young adults. Primary data were collected by using a semi-structured interview schedule. This tool makes allowance for the collection of open-ended data; that is, researchers are allowed to probe by asking follow-up questions on participants' beliefs and feelings about a given topic (Creswell, 2014; Denscombe, 2007). The research targeted 150 participants. The overarching question employed was: *How do selected young adults from Yenagoa, Nigeria, explain what success means to them?* The leading research question was: *What does success mean to you?*

Convenient sampling, sometimes referred to as opportunity sampling, is a non-probability sampling method that was employed to select the participants. Of 150 participants targeted, 90 were interviewed. The researchers selected participants that were convenient to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). These are young adults between the ages of 18 and 25. The setting is Yenagoa, Bayelsa, Nigeria.

Findings and General Analysis

This section presents an analytical overview of the findings. Employing a data-reduction method, 12 themes were eventually identified to represent how success is conceptualised. A selection of these themes, along with direct responses and graphical representations are used to help with the interpretation of data. Figure 1 illustrates the number of respondents who identifies with each theme.

Figure 1: No. of Respondents for each Theme Selected
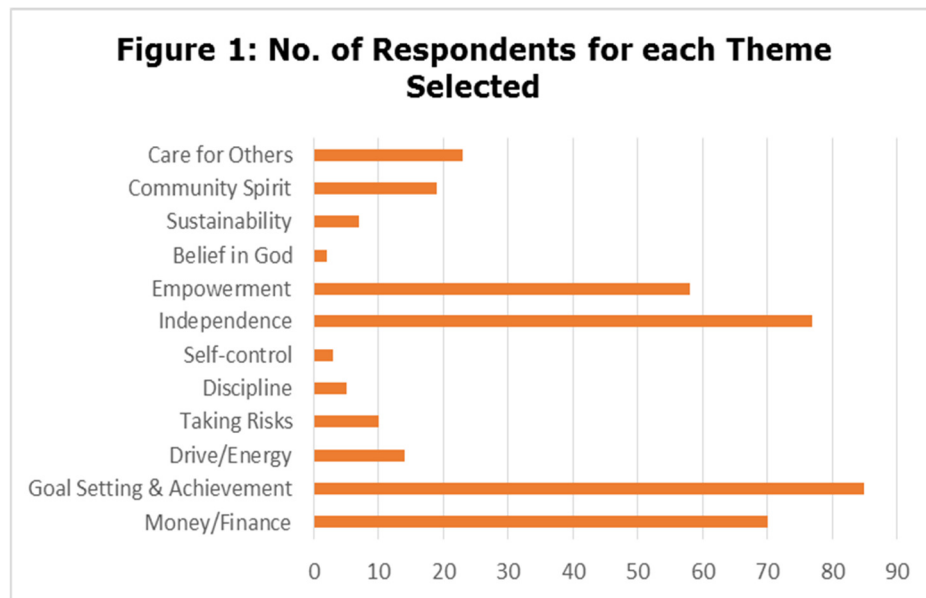
Bearing in mind that this paper addresses only a small part of the investigation, the analysis covers four main themes – *Goal Setting and Achievement, Money/Finance , Independence and Empowerment.*

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Goal Setting & Achievement and Independence

Figure 1 shows *Goal Setting & Achievement and Independence* to be the most popular choices among the participants (Figures 2 & 3). Based on the participants' responses, the two themes are linked together, hence the twinning of both themes for this sub-heading. The general belief from the participants is that goal setting and a reasonable level of independence are crucial to being successful.
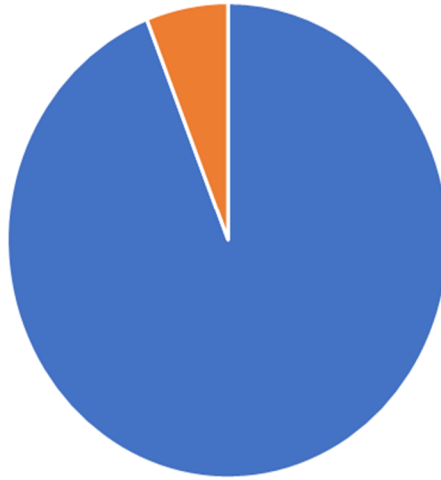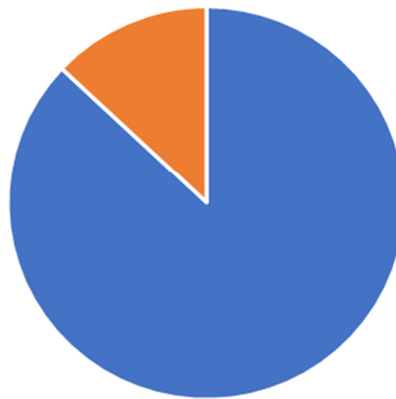

Figure 2: Goal Setting & Achievement

Figure 3: Independence

The participants see independence as playing a big role in helping them to get the materials and financial help they need in order to achieve their goals. These conditions are named as being able to provide the ambition and drive that are needed to assist with becoming self-employed and realising other goals. Consider these participant's comment:

When you've made it in life. This means working towards your goals with a strong motive, objectives and trajectories based on what you desire and not what people want from you… The drive to be successful is to be independent and to affect lives positively… (Participant K).
Success is the ability to achieve any positive idea… (Participant D).

Goal setting implies planning ahead, understanding the social environment that surrounds you and charting a course on how to move forward (Avery and Reed, 2001). It is likely that moving forward was what Participant K had in mind when he/she used the expression, *"working towards your goals"*, which implies working to achieve something. Participant D clearly stated: *"Success is the ability to achieve"*. Perhaps, there was also the recognition that to understand the social environment is challenging within itself, hence the need to move forward *"with a strong motive"*. Some other expressions that make reference to goal setting are noted below:

Success is setting goals and achieving desired results… (Participant M).
Every goal comes with a timeline… the timeline is tied to his or her success drive… (Participant J).
Success is when you produce your desired goal for every task… (Participant L).
Success simply means reaching the goals that you have in life… (Participant N).

All but Participant N, share a similar perception on what success means. The common view taken is that there is an expected time limit involved to achieve a 'desired goal', suggestion that goal setting is associated with timekeeping and time management. A requirement of goal achievement is managing one's time since it takes a specific period of time to complete a given task (Dimitrova and Mancheva-Ali, 2018; Halim, 2018). Participant N's response is more of a general nature, but also suggests that success is not possible without goal attainment.

To return to the previous comment made by Participant K, there is an evident connection between '*making it in life'*, that is achieving success, and independence. There is no specific reference made to the type of independence spoken about. But research findings have shown that there is a strong link between financial independence and success (Borjas et al. 2020; Hardin, 2008). And given that finance was the third most popular category (Figure 1), it seems reasonable to assume that Participant K's response is alluding to financial independence. In fact, that same participant said: *"The drive to be successful is to be independent"*. It seems highly likely that the participant sees independence as having sufficient money to take care of his/her living expenses; and this is what financial independence denotes. Moreover, the comments made by Participants N and R, give more weight to the assumption of financial independence:

*Success means the attainment of wealth…* (N).
Success is financial freedom… the drive to do more things and take more risks… (R).

Given that financial independence gives one a sense of achievement, the participants' responses that links success to wealth attainment and financial freedom are well in order. This kind of independence is rather empowering because it allows one to make his/her own decisions.

Money/Finance
In the previous subheading, financial independence is linked to goal setting and achievement. But financial independence is not possible without having the money

that gives a healthy financial status. The importance that participants attached to money and success is shown in Figure 4.


Figure 4: Money/Finance
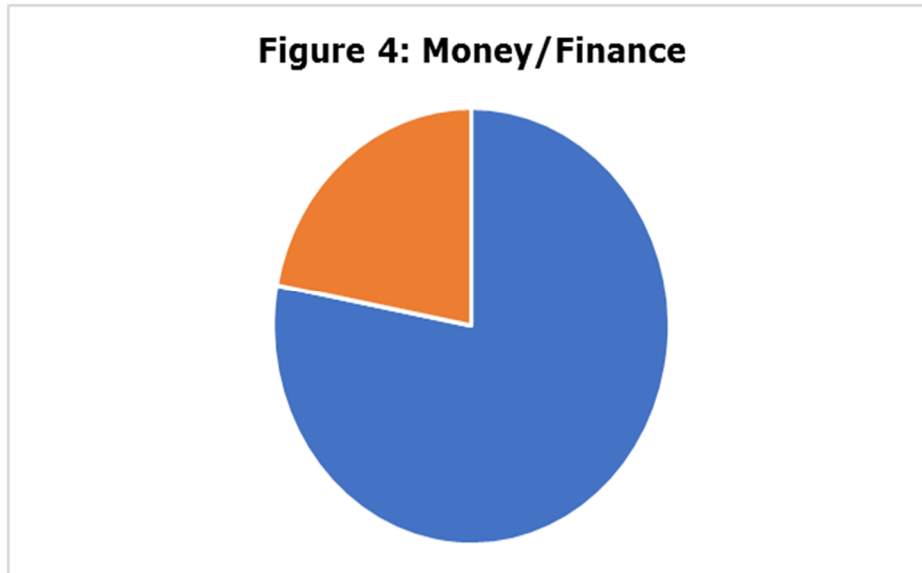
In a study that examined the variation in young adults' transitions to financial independence and the relationship between these transitions and financial security, Bea and Yi (2019, p. 397) found that the patterning and timing of financial independence in the transition to adulthood has implications for financial wellbeing. The participants in the study are young adults who have already transitioned to adulthood. However, from the responses given, it seems reasonable to conclude that their 'financial wellbeing' is not yet secured. Planned Future (2021) explains financial wellbeing as: "… feeling comfortable, secure and at ease with your finances… being able to understand and manage your finances not only in your day to day life, but for the future". This appears to be what Participant C is touching on by stating: "*It's not all about money, Success is being satisfied with yourself".* Another respondent said that having finance gives "*a lot of relaxation*". This is probably what Participant R had in mind when mentioning that one has success when one has "*financial freedom on his or her side*".

The results of the study so far show that the participants link financial independence to being successful. Interestingly, Bea and Yi's study also found that the paths to young adults' financial independence are best characterized by four types of trajectories – (1) consistently independent; (2) quickly independent; (3) gradually independent; and (4) consistently supported. They further noted that trajectories characterized by lower levels of familial support also report higher levels of financial insecurity (2019, p. 397). How the paths to financial independence were taken was not a feature of this research. Considering that financial independence was a well-talked about theme among the participants, the authors deem this an area to follow up during the next stages of the research in order to determine how these trajectories relate to success.

Empowerment
Approximately three quarters of the respondents see a direct relationship between empowerment and success (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Empowerment
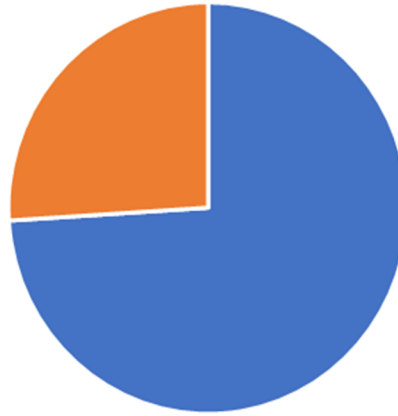
Empowerment has to do with the strength and confidence that one develops, or is given, that allows him/her to be in a position to manage his/her own affairs, or manage a family, community group or an organisation. It unfolds as a social practice that does not operate on a single level, but is multifaceted for it is also linked to well-being, health and environment (Jennings et al, 2006; Lansdown, 2001).

The fourth popular choice was empowerment (Figure 1). Approximately 67% of the participants see empowerment as playing a vital role in becoming successful. One participant links empowerment to *rational thinking* by relating that to be empowered one needs to be a rational thinker. From the authors' analysis, by and large, participants are able to think about particular everyday situations and make judgements in order to come to sensible conclusions. Results from an Epstein study notes that rational thinking correlates with self-determination and optimistic views about yourself and life in general (Epstein, 2003, p.40). In this way the relationship between success and empowerment is quite clear.

Another participant states: "… *success means being empowered and being able to empower others".* In this instance, success has a two-pronged role – (1) it empowers; and (2) it helps the empowered to empower others. That same participant adds: "*success is a continuous cycle of enriching other people's lives with values and also lending a voice to them".* In a similar vein, Participant L declares:

> *I have to be successful because there are a lot of people who depend on it… My drive to success is mainly to change lives and to build a legacy for my future and the future of others…*

It is highly likely that the *'enrichers'* of lives and the *'lenders'* of voices, together with those who want *'to change lives and build legacies for self and others',* derive a high degree of satisfaction from operating within a *'continuous cycle'* that is considered successful. This of course is rather empowering. Ironically, it is within this very empowered environment that disempowerment and inequalities of various kinds lurk. For example, in this age of rapid technological advancement, the lack of or the presence of technology itself can reinforce disparity (Alper, 2017). The authors identify the disparity aspect of empowerment and success as another area to pursue for the follow-up section of the research.

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Personal, Local and National Development

By and large, the responses given, show success to be related to either personal, local or national development. One participant stretched his meaning of success to global levels. The participant saw his efforts to progress as *"not successful until"* solutions for *"global problems" can be found.*

Personal Development: It is generally acknowledged that personal development is associated with the development of virtues, traits and skills over a period of time (Blustein, 2006; Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Goal setting and goal achievement are pursued with a view to attaining one's fullest potential. Personal development is also linked to confidence, empowerment and possibilities for employability.

The analysis thus far clearly shows that the participants of this study have made personal development a central point of their interpretation of what success means. They spoke of acquiring qualities such as *"understanding, compassion, courage… and inner strength"*, *"reaching desired goals"*, *"being satisfied"*, *"being responsible"*, *"having a vision of the future"* and *"building independence"*. Success was also linked to spirituality. Participant M declared that to be successful, *"as a Christian"* it is necessary *"to walk in the word of God"*. Another participant talked about *"fulfilling God-given assignments"*. These are not odd references because Rohn (2016) names *the spiritual* as one of the aspects of personal development.

Local Development: For this study, local development should be interpreted in the same framework as local community development or community spirit, one of the themes chosen for the analysis. 19 of the 90 respondents made a direct reference to community spirit (Figure 1). A popular African saying is: *it takes a village to raise a child*. Within this is a community spirit of collaboration and positivity. The desired product is the development of a strong local community since happy and healthy children grow into happy and healthy families. Participant K had this to say:

> *Failure is not an option… I have to be successful because there a lot of people who depend on it… My drive to success is mainly to change lives and to build a legacy for my future and the future of others…*

Similarly, Participant M wants to accomplish his/her God-given assignments *"for the benefit of others"*, while Participant L wants to be *"an icon in the community"* and Participant R intends to help *"people to be successful"*. It would seem that these participants' views of success are more than notional references, since they have a practical ring to them. These responses are aligned to two principles of the Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC):

- Collective action - coming together in groups or organisations strengthens peoples' voices.

- Working and learning together - collaboration and sharing experiences is vital to good community activity (SCDC, 2021).

Clearly, a healthy community spirit and success go hand in hand since the fundamental purpose of community spirit is to respect diversity, recognise human rights values and help people to achieve and progress.

National Development: The NV20:2020 economic vision that was expected to stimulate economic growth has not being realised. In fact, it is said that Vison 2020 "failed to meet its mandate" (Onyeji, 2020). This setback did not appear to dampen partici-

pants' national-development spirit. Participant is not satisfied with just being a community icon, but also desires to "*be an icon in the nation*". The analysis reveals that success should not totally depend on the outworking of mandates such as NV20:2020, but on the willingness of individuals to help others to be successful. Participant M puts it this way: "*success means making people to be successful out of my own success*".

It was generally accepted that Nigeria needed to put investment at the heart of its development programme. However, various challenges, including "insecurity and poor electricity supply" (Onyeji, 2020), experienced by investors were named as part of the failure of the vision. In scrutinising the responses, it was noted that investment was also linked to success, but not in the manner undertaken by the Nigerian governmental authorities. By and large, people are at the heart of the respondents' perceptions about what success means. And it is within this collective people identity that investment is expected to have positive results. In Participant's D words, success means "*to invest in the life of others*". Other participants did not express 'investment' in this same way, but it is clear that the focus on investing in people is advantageous to personal as well as national development; hence the need "*to make an impact… leaving a national trademark*" (Participant J) and to concentrate on "*leaving footprints in the sands of time*" (Participant K). These actions are relevant to the personal, local and national success journey.

Educational Success?
Interestingly, participants of this study hail from a local and national environment that vigorously promote academic, rather than vocational education as the route to success. Yet, from this initial stage of the research, none of the participants has viewed success from an academic or even vocational education standpoint. This is rather surprising. But what it does show is that the participants have stepped outside of the domains of educational achievement to frame their positions on *what success means*. At this stage, it was not determined why the all participants took this route, but their avoidance of the educational route is rather telling. Obviously, this is yet another area that should be followed up, not simply to challenge what the literature says about academic and vocational information (Tlapana and Myeki, 2020; Lolwana, 2016; Okwelle and Deebom, 2017), but rather to capture the participants very own explanations for their choices.

Conclusion

The paper looks at *what success means* to some young adults of Yenagoa, Nigeria. A qualitative approach was used to get the views of 90 participants in the 18-25 age range. To support the discussion and analysis, the paper makes use of a contextual framework that features two main themes – pedagogy and perceptions of vocational education. It explains why the *Redesigning Pedagogy* biennial international conferences, hosted by the National Institute of Education (NIE), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore, has inspired the research. It also highlights the tension that exists between the attainment of academic and vocational qualification.

Participants' responses were categorised under twelve themes, but four of these were used for the analysis and discussion. They are: *Goal Setting and Achievement, Money/Finance, Independence and Empowerment*. The most popular themes were chosen as a jump-off point for this stage of the research. An interesting section of the analysis is that no mention was made of academic or vocational qualifications. The authors have listed this finding as one of the areas for follow-up research.

The initial analysis shows that there is need for educators to redefine success. Given that they are making a conscious effort to redesign pedagogy, it follows then that there is also a need to redefine success. Meaningful education experiences will undoubtedly translate into ongoing advantages for personal development, community

(local) and national development. Sustainability in these areas can be made possible if students are allowed to be developed into productive and contributing citizens.

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