

Towards Introduction of Philosophy for Children in Nigerian Basic Educational Curriculum

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Abstract

This paper explores the introduction of philosophy for children in relation to the Nigerian basic educational curriculum. Specifically, the discussion focused on two folds - curriculum and philosophy for children, and pedagogy in teaching philosophy for children. The reason for this bifurcation is to ascertain whether Nigeria requires philosophy for children to be part of its curriculum at basic educational level. The impact of this programme on children's life was highlighted and its conclusion argued that Nigerian educational policymakers should urgently pay adequate attention to the introduction of this programme in its curriculum and adopt amongst other methods the analytical method as a working pedagogy for effective functioning of this programme.

Keywords: curriculum, Pedagogy, philosophy, Nigeria, basic, education

Introduction

Often time, one wonders about the causes of dwindling academic situation in the Nigerian educational institutions; and several reasons come to mind. The author believes that one of such reasons centre on the poor curriculum contents and inadequate pedagogical approach. This manifests in the reasoning and thinking of the students produced in Nigerian educational institutions. Indeed, it is the view of this author that the level of children's thinking ability in the Nigerian context is relatively poor while comparing them with other children globally. This means they lack the essential elements of critical thinking, creativity, and broad-mindedness. Little wonder while the author, being an educator is often taken aback by a student's sense of reasoning, lack of confidence and poor level of creative thinking. But while pondering on these issues, it is clear that the institution of learning has lost sight of an important part of the subject matter. By this, one means teaching children how to be critical in thinking and responding to issues from different perspectives. Having thoughtfully considered the above, this work argues for the introduction of philosophy for children in the Nigerian basic education curriculum.

Basic education is considered as the bedrock or foundation for further education, and one of its major aims is preparing the children for greater challenges in their future

educational pursuits and in the wider society. Many countries of the world like United States of America pay serious attention to the functionality of basic education. Such effort is seen in the area of introduction of philosophy for children across schools (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980). United States has recorded tremendous impact following the adoption of this programme. One is sure that Nigeria will record the same if government and policymakers will pay heed to this programme and consider education as the currency of the 21st century. To achieve the purpose of the article, arguments will be situated in two folds - curriculum and philosophy for children, and pedagogy in teaching philosophy for children. In this article, the author will use the following words interchangeably, learners, students and children.

Philosophy as an academic discipline has clear intellectual goals both for adults and children. This entails that it forces the mind to operate and function cognitively, and this is done through challenges, critical thinking, and structural interaction. Significantly, philosophy for children has a social goal as well, which is preparing the children for the process of democratic decision making. Equally, it can lead to the development of systematic participation and the consciousness of the individual (Haynes, 2002). Consequently, the teaching of thinking methods can be considered as the most general goal of this programme. Accordingly, Lipman (2008) affirms that the most important goal of the philosophy for children is to help the children learn how to think for themselves. From this perspective, there is a general recognition that children have full capacity to think and they require the help of teachers to engage them in philosophical thinking.

Thus, Philosophy for Children was an effort by philosophers and educators to bring philosophy to young people. This idea was originated partly to address some form of concerns about the state of the conventional education which they felt did not meet the demands of a contemporary democratic society, in terms of making children independent in their thought. By implication, this aspect of education did not equip the learner with the spirit of rational and logical thinking. This perhaps accounts for the reason why introduction of critical education became necessary in the United States of America's curriculum, with the view of having students experience the process of reasoning about philosophical problems, providing them with a toolset that they could apply to new problems (Brandt, 1988; Beyer, 1990).

Philosophy for children, in another dimension, is largely situated in a liberal education framework; one that promotes democratic values to prepare the students for their future citizenship through the creation of a community of inquiry (Bleazby, 2006). From the above, it is seen that children would be more equipped in making rational choices and taking into account the interests of others and themselves. Dewey (1938) holds that students excel when they are allowed to experience and interact with their education. It is clear why Dewey was totally against traditional education, where information and skills were found to be correct, and the work of a teacher was to transmit it to the children without adequate provision for their interest. This is to say that traditional education does not adopt and appreciate the essence of

critical and independent thinking among learners. However, one of the justifications of public education is that it provides children with the tools they need to participate in civil society. This forms part of the reasons why philosophy for children becomes imperative as philosophy enables them to engage in critical thinking and enquiry. While acknowledging this central aim of education, Gandhi (1976) notes: “to my mind, education is the spirit of enquiry, the ability to keep one’s heart and mind open to beauty and goodness, indeed all that surrounds us; to be able to think and judge for oneself.” Gandhi’s point and other scholars within this field suggest that education enables us to make a decision and be held accountable. Therefore, introducing a ‘thinking’ based pedagogy in the Nigerian basic education curriculum will not only benefit the learners and its community but also has positive effects on the teachers. This is because teachers play the role of a facilitator and encourage the children in teaching and learning.

Despite this, one is prompted to ask, is there space for children to discuss their ideas within today’s schooling, with the increasingly formalised instruction that passes for education? Can teachers justify sharing the source of knowledge and what should be talked about with the children? While considering these questions, it is of the essence to state from the outset that most of today’s schools do not provide children opportunity to express their views in the classroom settings, let alone becoming independent in their thinking, as teachers dominate the class discussion and leave the children as passive receivers of information. Therefore, the need to adopt philosophy for children becomes heightened, since children need to think for themselves and share ideas with others. This means critical thinking would help individuals to develop the ability to imaginatively put themselves in the place of others and understand the viewpoints of others. It would also advance their ability to listen with an open mind, even to a contradictory point of view. It is in this wise, that one can say that children are broad-minded and thinking for themselves.

In this connection, Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child says: ‘the child has a right to express a view and to have that view taken into account in any decision concerning them’ (UNICEF, 2007). Many nations of the world, including Nigeria, have signed up to this, but what is not clear is the stage of implementation and impact on all children of school age. It is right to say that this convention which speaks volumes can be considered as the basis for the introduction of philosophy for children in basic education in the Nigerian context. This is because at this level of education, children’s views are not always taken seriously and respected since most adults regard them as not endowed with thinking capacity. As mentioned earlier, one of the cognitive goals of philosophy is to enhance one’s thinking, and children are fully recognised in this light. Based on this, Fisherman (2010) states that the proponents of the Philosophy for Children movement often claim that philosophy is the ultimate subject to teach children how to pursue and improve in critical thinking. Again, Lipman (2003) notes that philosophy is the only discipline whose practice comprises the entirety of critical thinking.

The author's critical stance towards this discourse and introduction of philosophy for children in the Nigerian basic education curriculum has developed out of a sense of awkwardness and dissatisfaction with the level of educational practices in Nigeria. Firstly, the author felt as a lecturer in the tertiary educational system, that children are not well taken care of in terms of building self-confidence and thinking constructively without undue influence of the teacher. Their sense of sensibilities and temperament is completely suppressed in the class discourse. Secondly, children's level of discussion about democratic society and allied subjects is quite low compared to their counterparts globally. This is as a result of not being trained to reason rationally and thinking philosophically about issues that concerns them and society. This motivation, thus, calls for policies to address the overall aim of critical thinking in the curriculum as well as making provisions to engage the children in critical discourses.

Curriculum and Philosophy for Children

It is essential to present a brief overview of the educational curriculum in Nigeria and then argue for the effective introduction of philosophy for children. Curriculum plays an essential role in any educational system. This is perhaps why most nations often reviewed their curriculum contents on a regular basis to include new challenges and develop the needed pedagogy for effective delivery. The curriculum that Nigeria operated before independence in 1960 was formulated by the British system. It was regarded by most Nigerians as inadequate due to its bookish nature and non-provision to meet the need of the people at that time. Nwagwu (1983) noted that "in Nigeria the argument has been that the education inherited from Britain was exotic, bookish and consequently insensitive to Nigeria's immediate social and community life." Because of this, several attempts were made to find a curriculum at all levels of education that would suit the Nigerian society. Such moves culminated to the 1969 National Curriculum Conference, which was a landmark achievement in Nigeria, as stakeholders from different sectors of the country gathered to share ideas for a new birth of the country's curriculum.

According to Adaralegbe (1972), the 1969 curriculum conference "was the forum for the discussion of a wide range of issues and problems underlying the determination of an appropriate curriculum for the nation's schools". From the above, the impact of this conference was evidenced in the nation's life, especially in the establishment of the National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1977.

Regardless of the tremendous efforts and commitment on the part of the government to organize this conference, it is sad to remark that the said efforts have not yielded the desired fruits in its totality from the inception of its review of the curriculum to the present times. This is because the Nigerian curriculum is still lagging in some areas like critical thinking which, for the author, no serious attention is given on how to enshrine it in the curriculum. The absence of this constitutes serious challenges not only to the children but to the wider society because of the dearth of rational and philosophical thinking which results in intolerance among the Nigerian populace.

Given the above, Akinlua (2006) pointed out that “while the content of curricular kept changing from time to time, structure and practice remained stagnant.” Akinula’s position reveals in greater extent the deficient nature of the curriculum currently operated by Nigeria. The author’s experience in teacher education proves the above, as no significant innovation is introduced to support the children. Indeed, the curriculum and syllabus in basic or primary education at present is not different from what was operated in the past. Shaffer and James (2005) opine that standards-driven curriculum is not preparing children to be innovators at the highest technical levels. Although their concern addresses a different context, this also applies to the Nigerian context as the education given to people does not adequately prepare them to fit into their society, especially in the 21st century. However, one of the debates that have been ongoing for years is whether the curriculum has been able to address the various needs of the children or not. It is deplorable that educational policymakers are not willing to call for a review of the current curriculum, they give little or no attention to the children’s thinking ability and how to support them. Because of this, it is expected of Nigerian policymakers to have a rethink about the current curriculum operating in the country and adopt philosophy for children to support the children. This active consideration would enhance their thinking and reasoning ability.

However, Philosophy for Children has several implications for the curriculum. Its inclusion in the Nigerian curriculum would develop and support the critical thinking skills in the learner through the philosophical approach. In this light, one can take the concept of critical thinking to connote understanding the expressions of thoughts, analysis of expressions, awareness of unexpressed thoughts and awareness of prejudices. This portends that for children to be quite aware of what is happening around them and proffer solution when necessary, they must possess the analytical spirit and fully conceptualise their thoughts and reason them out philosophically. To develop critical thinking skills in the classroom, activities that would increase classroom communication and interaction must be encouraged. Potts (1994) added that asking open-ended questions to children, giving ample time for questions to be answered, and asking them to use acquired skills in different situations is equally important. Fundamentally, the aforementioned attributes are lacking in the Nigerian educational basic curriculum owing to the popular practice where teachers dominate the class discussion and provide little or no room for the learner to participate in class activities. However, it is argued that allowing children a chance to raise questions in the classroom enables them to appreciate their opinion and position, and their thinking ability can greatly be improved. Justifying the above position, Hirose (1992) maintained that asking open-ended questions is an important tool in the development of critical thinking, because children tend to solve problems, interrogate them, and compare their thoughts and beliefs with other people's thoughts and beliefs. Therefore, the main objective of the philosophy for children's approach is to develop the ability of children to construct, reason, question, interpret, make sense of meaning, and make connections between meanings (Fisher, 1995).

Following this argument, this author submits that children's insights including reasoning, empathy, active listening skills, logical reasoning, and discrimination are positively affected and influenced by philosophical inquiry. By contrast, the role of the curriculum in any form is to develop and broaden the horizon of the children and open their eyes to view issues from different perspectives thus leading to effective contributions to all spheres of life in the society.

Pedagogy of Teaching Philosophy for Children

It is generally believed that teachers apply different teaching methods to enable them to achieve their teaching objectives. In other words, there are different teaching approaches adopted by teachers; it is the view of this author that such depends on the different subjects under consideration, and in so doing they can accomplish their teaching objectives. In this regards, the words of Alexander (2008) is insightful here when he stated that, “a variety of approaches allows for a variety of objectives in teaching.” What this connotes in the context of this work is that, adopting a completely new pedagogy in teaching philosophy for children in basic education in Nigeria, would enable the teacher to rely upon the power of criticality and creativity. This is also depending on the type of curriculum which is an important part of the pedagogical approach. The OECD (2008) and Donaldson (1992) recognise that the curriculum should emphasize ‘developing the ability of children and young people to critically evaluate information, make connections, develop deep conceptual understanding and transfer knowledge and skills to new situations to solve complex problems creatively.’ It can be argued from the above concerns that one of the appropriate methods in teaching in this programme is guiding children to develop their thoughts, evaluate and have a different mindset towards other’s views. This is of the essence as they would be critical in receiving and accepting any information at their disposal. In the same vein, McGuinness (1999) argues that “teaching and allowing students the opportunity to develop their thinking skills in specific subjects and their application across the curriculum is very important as they develop a person’s thinking to a qualitatively higher level”. She also added that specific results of the importance of including thinking skills in the curriculum where learners become active creators of their knowledge, involves enabling learners to go beyond the information given, deal systematically and flexibly with problems and to adopt a critical attitude to information. This author is inclined to agree with McGuinness’ perspective because a critical disposition to information provides the learner with open-mindedness and a new way to resolve issues.

Therefore, from all the positions above, the best pedagogy in teaching philosophy for children in contemporary times is analytical pedagogy, but this is not to say that other methods are inconsequential. The reason for this preference is that learners would, on their own, look at issues and analyze them from different viewpoints and agree on an independent position without being influenced by any external forces. To this end, teachers need to provide the learners with all the necessary supports and guide them accordingly for effective application of the aforementioned method.

Conclusion/recommendations

In conclusion, this work argues that there is an urgent need to introduce and implement philosophy for children in the Nigerian basic educational curriculum. Several reasons account for this, especially when considering the impact of critical thinking in the 21st century. It was further revealed that, this programme as a pedagogical approach enables children to participate in group dialogue focusing on philosophical issues. Based on this, this work suggests that the curriculum should at all times aim at providing children with good values, develop their integrity, give them a sense of autonomy and help them to be responsible citizens capable of contributing to national growth. This could mean that the Nigerian government and policymakers should formulate a curriculum that builds on children's strength, interests, and experiences as well as promoting an enquiry mind and capacity to think logically and creatively. Pertinently, the government is enjoined to review and re-examined its curriculum to reflect philosophy for children which is the hallmark for critical and rational thinking.

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