

PLATO'S EDUCATIONAL IDEAS: IT'S CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE TO NIGERIA SITUATION

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Abstract

This paper sought to examine Plato's theory of education and its contemporary relevance to Nigeria situation. Plato was the pace-setter of Western education who conceived education as indispensable for formation of the ideal state. Plato's educational ideas are meant to reconstruct the socio-political situation of Athens of his time. The positive contributions of Plato in the field of education have great relevant implications on Nigeria's educational system. It provides the rationale for Nigerians to educate and elect their government responsively. Plato sought to develop a political system in which the leaders would be knowledgeable and good. Security challenges are one of the basic problems bedeviling Nigerian society in this present era. The proper education of Nigerian military will make them to be highly spirited, patriotic and strong. However, the massive unemployment of Nigerian graduates necessitates the need for technical and vocational training. Plato's idea of education of the artisans (masses) according to the needs of each craft conforms to vocational training, which is indispensable for skill acquisition for useful living in the society.

The desire to read, write and equip oneself for life is generally pursued by people and nation across the globe. Education is geared towards self actualization. No wonder, Nwafor (2007) conceived that education is designed to equip individuals with desired knowledge; skill and attitude that will enable them live a fulfilled life in the society. Hence, education enhances national transformation. The knowledge, skills and

positive dispositions or attitudes acquired in school are applied towards the well being of the society. Thus, education is a worthwhile engagement, which is valued in every society.

The school and society are meant to complement each other. On this note, Onwuka (2002) portrayed that education should take into consideration the cultural background of the people where it is situated. However, true education cannot be actualized outside the terrain of philosophy. Philosophers are conceived as the ultimate educators of mankind.

Plato was a renowned Greek philosopher, whose educational theory is geared to reconstruct the Athenian socio-political situation of his time. According to Barrow (1973), the formal Athenian education propagated by the sophists in 5th century B.C. was inadequate to address the problems of Athenian society. The aim of Athenian education of his time was to inculcate the art of rhetoric and persuasive speech at a high cost for the rich or upper class who might use it to achieve their selfish political ambitions. Plato was aggrieved by the way his master, Socrates, was killed by the corrupt Athenian government. He sought to form an ideal state in his *Republic* where future leaders will be educated in order to remedy the ills in the society.

Conceptual Clarification of Basic Terms

The key terms associated with this study are education and Nigeria. Before plunging into the mainstream of this work, it is important to clarify these basic terms in order to enhance a better understanding of this work.

Education is an ambiguous concept. There is no universally or succinct definition of education. Nwabuisi (2002) recorded that the concept of education is derived from two fold etymological definitions. The first school of thought has it that education is derived from the Latin word “educare” which means “to train” or “to form”. Education is one of the important factors that distinguish man from other animals. John Locke was one of the chief proponents of this school of thought. He upheld that the child’s mind at birth is a “tabula rasa”- a clean slate or blank sheet on which nothing is written on it (Stumpf, 1994). The newly born child is to be trained with dedication, high level of commitment and undiluted patriotism because education is what separates man from other lower animals. Education is the process of training and bringing up the child physically and mentally. This school of thought applies to informal education. Informal education is the initial education the child receives at home as a member of a social group. In this regard, education is all the procedures by which a child builds up the ability, attitudes, and other forms of behaviors which are the positive value of the society in which s/he lives.

On the other hand, the second school of thought holds that education is derived from another Latin word “educere”, which means “to lead” or “to pull or draw out”. The main proponent of this school was Plato. Plato conceived that man is born with some innate ideas which is used in educating the child. In this sense, education helps to

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develop the mind. This is the rationale propounded by Socrates that education is a midwifery which helps people to bring out what nature is endowed (Omoregbe, 1991). Thus, education is the process of helping the child to develop his/her potentials. This ideology conforms to formal education. According to Hornby (2011), formal education is education or training received in a school, college or university, with lessons, exams, etc, rather than gained just through practical experience. It is systematically planned and implemented in an institution of learning. Education in the context of this work is to be understood in the sense of formal education. Plato's notion of education was in line with the second etymological definition of education. In this work, Plato's theory of education is geared to be implemented in Nigeria.

Nigeria is a country in West Africa. According to Njoku (2000), the term "Nigeria" was coined by Flora Shaw, a journalist who later married Lord Lugard who suggested in an article for the *Times* that the several British Protectorates on the Niger be known collectively as Nigeria. The country came into being in this present form in 1914 when the two British protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria were amalgamated by Sir Frederick Lugard. But, before the creation of Nigeria by British lords, Nigeria was made up of a number of great kingdoms that maintained complex systems of government independent of contact with Western world. Nigeria gained her independence in 1960 from the British colonial government. The country is made up of thirty-six states with more than two hundred and fifty ethnic groups. The major ethnic groups among them are: Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba.

Plato's Theory of Education

Plato was born in 428/27 to 547 B.C. in the Greek city of Athens. He came from Oligarchic family. The teaching of his master Socrates influences Plato in his philosophy. He found his academy where he lived and worked for the rest of life as an educator, philosopher and political scientist.

His theory of education stems from the rationalist conception of education. Plato was a rationalist who believed that true state of things lies in the world of forms. In other words, the world of forms is intelligible realities of visible things. On the other, Plato envisaged that sensible things are not the object of true knowledge. He proposed the theory of innate ideas, where certain ideas are inborn in the mind. Plato's *Metaphysics* in Russell (1945) conceived that the soul has pre-existed in the world of forms prior to its existence in this physical world of human experience. Education helps the mind to recollect and remember what it already knows in the world of form prior to its existence in this world.

Education deals with acquisition of knowledge. According to Omoregbe (1991), Plato's theory of knowledge portrayed that knowledge is virtue. In this sense, to know good is to do good, ignorance is the source of evil. In this sense, Plato conceived that one cannot do evil willingly. Since ignorance is the source of evil, education is geared to lead the mind out of ignorance.

Furthermore, Plato categorizes the different levels of knowledge. Hence, Stumpf (1994) portrayed that he used theory of divided line to show many levels of knowledge which depicts that a sensible thing is not the object of true knowledge. At the lowest level of knowledge is the opinion. Here, we have imagination and belief. Imagination is lower than belief because the mind takes sensory impressions of sense perception as deceptive and cannot be an object of true knowledge.

Above the visible realm lies thinking and intelligence or dialectics. Here lies the object of true knowledge. Thinking is lower than intelligence because in thinking, the mind makes abstraction and rises above the sensible objects. The highest object of knowledge is intelligence or dialectics. It deals with the art of abstract reasoning and looking beyond particulars and appearance. Education is geared to attain this level of knowledge. Training at this level requires reflection and proper understanding of things.

Education of Citizens

The aim of education for Plato is to make men good as citizens. Plato proposed to form ideal state in his *Republic*. In this state, the citizens are classified into three: the artisans, the guardians and the rulers. Each is to be educated to carry out their task efficiently in the society. No wonder, Plato conceived in Ferrari (2000) that there is justice in the state when each class is performing its proper function. The artisans are to be educated according to the need of each craft to provide goods and services for the state. Education of the artisans or masses synchronizes with vocational training. On the other hand, the guardians are to be educated to defend the state from internal and external aggression.

Plato believed that both men and women could be guardians. And to ensure that the guardians carry out their tasks efficiently, special training and provision are made for them. Plato buttressed in Cooper (1997) that education in music and physical training are very important for the guardians to develop a character that is both gentle and high spirited. This is geared to make them absorb the laws and preserve its belief against corruption from pleasure, pain, fear and desire. Moreover, Stumpf (1994) envisaged that in order to preserve the unity of guardians, they should own properties in common. The permanent individual family would be eradicated, and there would be a single family of guardians. Sexual relations would be restricted only to special marriage festivals. Young men who have distinguished themselves in war and duties should be given more opportunities to sleep with women in order to breed stronger children. The children born to the guardians will be detached from their mothers and given to officers appointed to take care of them. The children will be brought up in a crèche in the care of nurses living in a special part of the city.

However, Plato portrayed that education is necessary for good management of a state. The ruler is to be educated to pilot the affairs of the state. Hence, he sought to develop a political system in which leaders would be knowledgeable and good. In this

regard, the leaders are educated to acquire the highest level of knowledge (dialectics). Through the study of dialectics, he will be well grounded in abstract reasoning, knowing the vision of good and bad. This was what Plato meant when he said that a state will be good only when philosophers become kings and kings become philosophers.

Plato's notion of education is designed mainly for the philosopher kings, it is expected that a person who is being prepared to rule must at least be conversant with the study of literature, music and elementary mathematics at the age of eighteen. Then, at the age of twenty, after a two years period of military training, those who give the evidence of their competence and suitability proceed to higher education and subsequent practical experience (Ferrari, 2000:104- 107). At the age of twenty, few that distinguished themselves would be selected to pursue an advanced course in mathematics. At age of thirty, a five years course in dialectics and moral philosophy would begin. The next fifteen years would be spent gathering practical experience through public service. Finally, at the age of fifty, the ablest men who reach the highest level of knowledge, the vision of good, would then be ready for the task of governing the state.

Nigeria's Educational System

The memorandum of National Policy on Education of Federal Republic of Nigeria operates 9:3:4 system of education. It deals with nine years compulsory basic education. According to *National Policy on Education* (2004), basic education comprises six years of primary education and three years of junior secondary education. Those who still want to continue with education will proceed to three years senior secondary and four years tertiary education.

Western education in Nigeria is a product of colonialism. Thakur (1980) lamented that although the emergence of western education enlightens our people in different ways but this does not serve the interest of our people in most cases. The bad effect of this type of education gave rise to the national curriculum conference of 1969 to address the problem of education. A foundation was laid for the changes in the Nigeria educational system. The aims and the objectives of Nigeria education recommended at the conference covered the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education. They incorporated the cognitive, psychomotor and affective domain of human development unlike the old system which emphasized only the cognitive domain to the detriment of others.

The change in Nigeria's educational curriculum is designed in such a way that the students will receive enough intellectual education, adequate manipulative and physical training, well grounded emotional, social and attitudinal guidance of people for each level.

Philosophy and Goals of Education in Nigeria

The school and society are two sides of the same coin. It is through the school that the young learners acquire the lifestyle of the society. Hence, the curriculum must reflect the cultural values of the society. Education must be directed according to the need of the people at a particular point in time. The needs and aspirations of Nigeria are seen in the five main national goals of Nigeria as enunciated in the *National Policy on Education* (2004: 6) as the building of:

- (a) a free and democratic society;
- (b) a just and egalitarian society;
- (c) a great and dynamic economy;
- (f) a land full of bright and full opportunities for all citizens.

These are the national aspirations for the foundation of the philosophy of Nigerian education. The national philosophy of education aims at integrating the individual Nigerians thus:

- (a) The development of the individual into a sound and effective citizen.
- (b) the full integration of the individual into the community; and
- (c) The provision of equal access of educational opportunities for all citizens at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels both inside and outside the formal school system (*National Policy on Education*, 2004: 7).

However, the philosophy and goals of Nigeria's education would be fruitful if it is well implemented. It is evident that the *National Policy on Education* (2004) has provided not only the aims and objectives of education in Nigeria. Also, it has enunciated the steps and means to be taken in order that the aims and objectives it presents to the nation can be better achieved. But, the main problem of education in Nigeria is lack of implementation of educational policy as a result of political crisis among other factors. On this note, Ikejiani (1964) bewailed that there is a big gap between operations and policy makers. Thus, there is the need for the collective effort of the government, students, parents, the school authority and the general public towards actualization of the aims and objectives of education in Nigeria.

Implications of Plato's Theory of Education on Nigeria

Platonic education served the need of the Athenians at the moment. Economic and political life of the Athens were reflected in his system of education, Plato sought to develop a political system in which leaders would be knowledgeable and good. And this can be very relevant to Nigeria's educational system. One of the main objectives which serve as foundations for the national policy, upon which the philosophy of Nigerian education is built, is to create a free and democratic society. Nigeria's philosophy of education is based on democratic principles. People should be educated to elect their government responsibly. The political and economic crises we have now

in Nigeria are as a result of bad leadership. Achebe (1983) rightly observed that the problem with Nigeria is bad leadership. Bad people force themselves into government without the proper elective process. If people are educated properly, they cannot perpetrate such act in view of its consequences.

Hence, Nigerian leaders have to be educated in the knowledge of the good which will help them to seek for the common good of the people. It will contribute to form the necessary understanding which would assist the public to perceive, think, imagine, desire, choose and act in a way that is fully and distinctively human.

Plato saw education in music and physical training as very essential for the guardians to develop a character that is both gentle and high spirited at the same time. Hence, *Plato's Republic* in Cooper (1997) elucidated that this proper nature and upbringing would make them absorb the laws and preserve its belief against corruption from pleasure, pain, fear and desire. Nigerians should incorporate the positive aspects of Plato's philosophy into their military school. Nigerian soldiers have to be educated in order to carry out their tasks efficiently. They should not use their strength as an advantage to exploit the masses. Thus, they should be educated to resist the attraction of going into government to control the affairs of the state which is not meant for them. This anomaly brings injustice, anarchy and corruption. Nigeria is still suffering the bad effects of military authoritarianism in their socio-political system.

Furthermore, Plato's education of the masses according to the need of each craft is necessary for the provision of goods and services for the state. This can be very relevant to Nigerian situation. It will help to accomplish the national goals upon which the philosophy of Nigerian education is built. In order to achieve a united, strong and self-reliant nation, government should equip the schools with proper infrastructural facilities necessary for practical training in different fields of learning. Vocational training should be encouraged in schools to enable the students acquire the skills for useful living in the society. There is the need for Africans to embark on their technology instead of relying solely on manufactured goods imported from advanced economies of Europe and America.

On the other hand, Plato's system of education is quite different from Nigeria's educational system. *Plato's Timaeus* in Cooper (1997), gave room for moral education, which allow for cultivation of virtue and goodness. This seems to be lacking in Nigeria's educational system. Moral education should be introduced in Nigeria's educational system at all levels and not just only to primary or secondary education.

Again, Nigeria's 9:3:4 system of education differs from Plato's system of education. Plato devised different form of education for each class of citizen. For instance, Platonic education of rulers stipulated that at the age of eighteen, that a person who is being prepared to rule must study literature, music and elementary mathematics. After this, he pursues a rigorous physical and military training for two years. At the age of twenty, few that distinguished themselves will be selected to pursue an advanced course in mathematics. At age of thirty, a five years course in dialectics and moral

philosophy would begin. The next fifteen years would be spent gathering practical experience through public service. But, physical and military training is lacking in Nigeria's educational system for the masses. On this note, physical and military training should be introduced into Nigeria's educational system after tertiary education before the practical experience of youth service. It will help to balance their intellectual learning with physical fitness of the body. Besides, it is a pre-requisite for effective experience of youth service.

Evaluation

Plato has contributed immensely in the field of education but there are certain loopholes in his philosophy. Plato's theory of knowledge specifies that a sensible thing is not the object of true knowledge. Hence, his theory of knowledge fails to recognize that certain knowledge can also be derived from the senses. On the other hand, intelligence and senses are the object of true knowledge. In line with this view, Aristotle in Eboh (1995) upheld that there is no knowledge in the mind which does not come from the senses. Thus, sensible world is the source of knowledge in the intelligible realm because one moves from what is known to the unknown.

It is not the case in Plato's theory of knowledge to conceive that knowledge is virtue. In that sense, to know good is to do good and ignorance is the source of evil. Hence Plato fails to recognize the weakness of human free-will. It is common to see some people who willingly indulge in evil acts. Aristotle sees the irrational part of the soul as the source of evil. Augustine (1960) sees on his part the fall of man as the cause of evil in the world.

A close look at Plato's educational ideas suggests that Plato advocated for inequality in his classification of citizens. According to Stumpf (1994), Plato's classification of citizens is based on the 'noble lie' that the god who molded people mixed gold in the composition of those who are to rule and put silver in the guardians, and iron and brass in the farmers and craftsmen. Based on this assertion, the citizens of a state can be demoted or promoted from one class to another. The noble lie implies that a person is determined by nature to belong to any class in the society. But, the question is: Are all men equal? All men are somehow fundamentally equal in their biological make-up. As such, they should be free to choose the job suitable to their abilities instead of the deterministic influence of nature.

Again, in the education of the guardians, communal ownership of property is utopic. This is so because people tend to take good care of their private properties at the expense of the public property. Hence, the guardians should have their private wives and properties for this will engender self-control and peace in the society. In addition, Plato did not support equal and universal education which is the main basis of philosophy of Nigerian education. His education is organized mainly for the philosopher-king. The education of the guardians and artisans is pursued for utility purpose and not for the purpose of gaining real knowledge. In this regard, the education

of the guardians and artisans should be extended to include both the cognitive and affective domains of learning. Nevertheless, these loop-holes in Plato's system of education are not meant to encounter the great contributions of Plato in the educational field as the pace-setter of western education.

Conclusion

This paper has examined Plato's educational ideas and its implications on the Nigerian situation. Plato's theory on education is important for education of Nigerian leaders. Good leadership is indispensable for peaceful co-existence which drives development in all sectors of the society. The positive aspects of Plato's philosophy are useful in Nigeria's military school and vocational training of the masses in order to acquire useful skills for effective living in the society.

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