SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT IN PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION: SOME COMMENTS

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Abstract

The paper seeks to examine the philosophical schools of thought in education and how they can be used as strong foundation for a viable educational system in Nigeria in the 21st century. It argues that the ideological variations in different philosophical systems have significantly, contributed to the different conceptions of education, of the various school structures, the teacher-learner relationship, the curriculum and the teaching methods in any given educational system. The paper establishes that schools of thought in philosophy of education arc the ideological foundation upon which a meaningful and effective system of education could be based. It further posits that none of (he philosophical system is an iron cast without Us Haws; none is exclusively sufficient to guide an educational system. Rather, a synthesis of the different philosophical schools of thought will produce; in ideal philosophy of education in any given educational system.

Introduction

Millard and Bertocci (1969: 196); in their work, "Philosophy and Philosophy of Education", posited a speculative definition of Philosophy of education. According to them, "Philosophy of education is concerned with developing ... a positive conception of what education ought to be in the light of as much information about man, society, and the universe as he can muster from all available areas of experience, and knowledge". These scholars do not concern themselves much with the rational activity of reflecting upon, analyzing and criticizing the current educational system and processes, but rather, they devoted their intellectual energy to intuiting on positive and rational philosophical systems, that could be applied to investigate problems of forma! schooling. The outcome of such speculative processes, according to Millard and Bertocci, results in what is called philosophical schools of thought in education. By philosophical schools of thought, they mean different philosophical positions or world views expressed and shared by like-minded philosophers on what education is and what it ought to be. With reference to Millard's and Bertocci's speculative definition of Philosophy of education, it is pertinent to add that philosophy of education includes both the processes of criticism, analysis and reflection, and the products of the reflections which are capable of enhancing the process of education. In other words, the combination of normative, speculative, analytical and critical exploration into educational issues and problems constitute inclusively, the true meaning of Philosophy of education. Central to the discourse in philosophy of education is the theme of schools of thought in philosophy of education. The importance of this theme in philosophy of education cannot be glossed over. A proper understanding and exploration of the tenets of these schools of thought is necessary because the meaningful ness and effectiveness of any education system is contingent on (he philosophical worldview embraced and extolled by such a system. These philosophical worldviews are reasoned presuppositions either explicitly expressed or implicitly assumed in every educational system. They can either make or mar an educational system depending on how their expressions are translated in reality in any given educational system.

It is on the above background that this paper shall examine the schools of thought in philosophy of education. Our focus here is to critically explore the basic tenets of these schools of thought with a view to showing their strengths and inadequacies. Furthermore, it is hoped that our discussions in this paper will stimulate ideas on the plausible ways of evolving and restructuring the philosophical foundation of Nigerian educational system for improved efficiency and better qualitative performance in meeting the challenges of modernity in 21st century Nigeria. The schools of thought in philosophy of education, which we shall be examining in this paper, are: idealism, realism, naturalism, pragmatism and existentialism.

Idealism and Education

Idealism is the name which has come to be used for all philosophic theories which give priority to mind (Antz, 1962: 237). Some of the foremost articulate members of the 'school' aside Plato include: Rene Descartes, George Beckley, Spinoza Immanuel Kant, St Augustine, and Hegel Friedrich and among others. Members of this school of thought explain all existence in terms of the mind and holds that ideas are the only true reality. By the mind, the idealists sometimes mean the spiritual element in man, sometimes the intelligence and reasoning capacity of a person. But the most common meaning is that of mental or spiritual elements (Akinpelu, 1988:132). In view of this idealist metaphysics, the personality of the individual constitutes the most important aim of education., The process of education according to this view is to be geared towards the attainment of the individual's development

In its epistemology, idealism holds that knowledge obtained through the sense is always uncertain and dubitable. It is only through reason that man can come to know of anything. This is so because; only the faculty of reason can grasp the pure spiritual forms (reality) beyond the material aspects of things. Thus, idealist emphasized reason, mind and intelligence of man in the process of education. Perhaps, to make this point explicit, let us briefly examine education in Plato's idealism.

•The process of education lo Plato is that of turning the eye of the soul from darkness to light. Figuratively used, 'soul' here means a person; darkness means ignorance; light means knowledge. Therefore education is a process that leads a person from-the realm of ignorance into the limelight of knowledge. It is the process of discovering knowledge through human reason. Knowledge to Plato is a sort of discovery of lost ideas already known by the human soul while in the ideal world. Thus, education is now that process by which the soul can be helped to regain already learnt ideas in the ideal world. It is the process of the development of the person by self. It is what the individual learner makes out of what is presented to him that constitutes his education.

The school as an educational institution, therefore, exists to provide the right atmosphere and proper direction for the growth of the personality of the individual, to enlarge his personality by increasing his knowledge, to cultivate his aesthetic taste, to frame his character and to equip him with suitable skills. The education to be made out of the individual in the school is to further enhance the perception of the individual knowledge as only an integral part of a large whole. In order to achieve these objectives, the curriculum is structured to emphasize those subjects that will improve his intelligence and bring about the spiritual potentialities. Fundamental in the idealist curriculum, are four basic skills that should be represented. Namely: language skills, scientific skills, normative skills and aesthetic skills.

The language skills are to equip the student in the cultural understanding of their environment. The scientific skills are included in the curriculum to explain physical process in the universe. Of most important in the curriculum is the normative skill, which has to do with moral conduct, proper conception of the ideal man, liberal and humanistic education. The aesthetic skills are included to appreciate beauty and spiritual nature.

In the idealist conception of education, the pupil is regarded as an individual responsible for leaning. He is regarded as one who has enormous potentials for growth both morally and cognitively. The real activity of learning is to be done by him. As an amateur on the track of learning, the teacher has to equip the pupil with external resources in terms of cultural norms and factual knowledge, which the pupil's mind will work and intuit upon. The teacher is considered to be a being nearer the perfect ideal of personality, hence a model, worthy of emulation by the pupil. The idealist teacher is expected to know his pupils; have professional excellence; command the respect of his pupils; be friendly with them, be a source motivation; one who can interpret life for them; learn as he teaches; and a practitioner of virtues ideals (Adebayo,2002: 36).

Methods of teaching recommended by the idealists include: imitation of the ideal model, dialectical or Socratic method, project method, and a lecture method. These methods all together, recognize the self-learning activity of the pupil and the positive influence of the teacher.

From the above exposition of idealist's philosophy of education, some evaluation could possibly be made. A critical look at the tenets of idealism especially as they affect the process of education shows that the school of education is comprehensive in scope and relevance. Though, one may be tempted to follow the line of thought that most of their ideological speculations are too abstract and infacl, obsolete for today's educational thinking. However, with a deep reflection,

one good character. While it can be argued that naturalism despises the spiritual nature of man in its understanding of education, such despise can however not be totally ignored.

The redundancy and relegation of reading materials by the naturalists in the educational process is condemnable. Books are very valuable media of education. They lead to confirmation and registration of ideas in the mind of the child hence cannot be ignored. Moreover, the idea that education be child-centred can be more easily disposed of. Though, on the surface level, it appears to be a laudable contribution. But on a critical reflection, it goes to show that the child should be allowed to explore his present interests, and to proceed to new learning tasks on his own initiatives and at his good time. The implication of this is that a concentration of effort on the immediate interest of the child will stunt his development; and allowing him to decide what new interest he wants to learn and when he wants to proceed to it is to make his learning haphazard, which may eventually lead to ruin. In addition, such a naturalistic understanding of the place of the teacher in educational processes makes him to take a passive lead. Rather, the teacher needs to give a positive lead and direction at least in matters of cultural, mental and moral developments, which all together define education more accurately than purely physical or biological growth understanding of the naturalists.

Be that as it may, naturalism can be appraised with their insightful contribution in the aspect of the psychological development of the child in relation to what he should be taught. Naturalism, understood as the education of the child in accordance with his nature makes learning easy and pleasant as possible.

Pragmatism and Education

One of the greatest philosophical 'schools' of thought that has influence educational theory and practice in contemporary times is pragmatism. Pragmatism is a philosophical 'school', which sees reality as a constant change. While despising traditional methods of doing philosophy, pragmatism developed as a revolt against sterile and useless metaphysics, which dominated the philosophical stages of time (Balogun, 2002: 135). As a product of contemporary philosophical reflection that began in the twentieth century, pragmatism stresses the use of scientific method as solution to man's problem. Pragmatists are more articulate in epistemology than metaphysics. Central to their epistemology is the view that knowledge is nothing but human experience processed and refined. Man acquires his experience in his attempt to master and solve the problems that his environment poses for him in the course of meeting his basic needs, wants and desires. Knowledge is the process or experience gathered from social living, which is processed by intelligence, and applied for solving problems. Only a useful idea that works is regarded as truth. As Williams James, one of the leading pragmatists puts it "truth is a practical consequence and the cash value of ideas". Other notable pragmatists are Charles Pierce, Charles Darwin and John Dewey.

John Dewey, best represents the philosophy of pragmatism applied to education. According to him, education is the "continuous reconstruction or reorganization of experience and which adds to the meaning of experience and increases the ability to direct the course of subsequent experience" (Dewey, 1916:76). Since knowledge comes through the processing of experience by intelligence using the problem-solving method, the aim of education is therefore, the development of the learner's intelligence to solve problems (Akinpelu: 147). Education for Dewey, must be dynamic and change from time to time in relevance to societal wishes and demands (Enoh, 1996; 165). From this, it can be seen clearly that constant change(s) is the bedrock of pragmatism and that pragmatism is against any form of stagnancy, which will either not work or lead to progress.

Before stating his philosophy of education in clear terms, Dewey, made a stringent criticism of many aspects of formal educational practices in his days (which are still predominant in many educational systems, Nigeria inclusive). Dewey, was very critical of the traditional, discipline-centred school education, where education is thought of as preparation for a future adult life; the curriculum is uniformly structured for every child without due concession to individual's interest and ability; the method of teaching that towers the teachers so much above the pupils and he exercises so great an authority while the pupils listen quietly, passively and fed with dead information. Given these criticisms, Dewey then sketched out the pragmatic view of what the school, the curriculum,' the teaching method and the role of the pupils and teachers should be.

The school according to Dewey, is primarily a social institution, which cannot be isolated from the community, nor should it remove the child from the community in whose life the child is expected to participate. It is believed that the school cannot directly change the society, but it can reform it by

equipping the children with social intelligence, and by holding up the ideals of the life in that society. This accounts for why the curriculum should be nothing more than the social life of the community simplified and translated into the classroom. In specific terms, the curriculum should be those that involve the child in exploring and discovering fact by himself with the teacher serving as the guide and moderator not the custodian of knowledge (Adebayo: 42). Problem solving is a vital component of the curriculum. Learner's active participation in the processes of learning is treasured. The pragmatist curriculum is the vehicle which fosters student growth in intelligence (Mkpa, 1990:57). That is, the capacity to construct knowledge of the good for wise decision-making in life.

While the sciences are much favoured in this type of curriculum, the social science and the humanities are equally not neglected. Irrespective of the compartments, the subject should be taught with a view to helping the learner to solve his problems, rather than store up information to be reproduced on demand. Whatever the subject, the most important point is the method of teaching. Pragmatism holds that the method to be employed in teaching should be group learning, which values the freedom of learners (Avoseh, 2000:249-250). Also emphasized is the experimental method. Its importance lies in that all aesthetically attractive things are to be entertained provisionally, until they have been tested by acting upon them (Aggarwal: 168).

Al Uiis junction, we may perhaps, altempt an evaluation of pragmatists' philosophy of education as presented by Dewey. His philosophy of education has been very useful and influential in the development of modern education practices. At least, his plea for the use of practical intelligence, backed by the use of science to tackle social and economic problems, is worthy of note at this period of time. His approved methods of teaching are an antidote to the traditional dogma of teacher's despotism. In addition, the pragmatism is worthy of appraisal in its sharp contrast to all kinds of mysticism, transcendentalism and absolutism. Pragmatism has equally been a powerful influence in interpreting the school as a community for the realization of the significance of the immediate experiences and present opportunities of the learner if he is to be a contributor to the march towards societal development.

Be that as it may, it could be argued that pragmatism's neglect of religious education, which they believe is metaphysical of sort, may result in the destruction of the roots of humanistic values and social ethics. Asides from this, the general objectives of education should transcend social efficiency and include the fullest realization of selfhood. A further critical reflection may have it that pragmatism places too much an emphasis on learning through personal experience at the expense of reliance on textbooks and authorities. The teaching roles ascribed to teachers by pragmatism may perhaps be highly herculean that only a few and gifted ones could cope with. The implication of this is that there will be less number of teachers in the system.

Existentialism and Education

Existentialism is a philosophy of existence. Though, not a homogenous 'school' as there are many existentialists philosophers like Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Bucker, Jean Paul Satre, Martin Heideigger and among others with different existentialists positions. Nevertheless, the label 'existentialism' is still appropriate for describing the common elements in the thoughts of the different existentialists. Existentialism deals with human beings in their concrete existence. That is, it investigates into the quality of life that a man lives; locating his place in the universe and examining the meaningfulness or otherwise of his existence.

Existentialism is a doctrine that man is a unique and isolated individual in an indifferent or hostile universe, responsible for his own action and free to choose his destiny. The most fundamental principle in the existentialist philosophy is that man is a free, self-determine being responsible for his actions. For the existentialist, the most significant of all traits of human existence is freedom. The individual has responsibility for his decision made with the full awareness of the consequence of his actions. Freedom, existentialists say, is something dreadful, giving rise to anguish, fear and anxiety in man. Because of this, man tries to deny its existence. Existentialists are also known for their dictum -'existence predicts essence'. That is, a man is 'thrown into existence' first, before defining himself through choices that he makes. This accounts for why they regard a man as 'an open possibility'. That is, a person is in the process of becoming and capable of actually becoming whatever, he wants to become.

Existentialists' epistemology emphasizes experience as their most important source of knowledge. Such an experience must be personal and subjective for it yields authentic knowledge. However, Existentialists further argue on objectivity of knowledge. According to them, "objectivity is obtained by the use of man's own reasoning power to consider the 'pros' and 'cons' of the issue, and

whatever decision is arrived at is 'objective' for him"(Akinpelu; 158). In their aesthetics, man is the judge of all that is valuable. What a man chooses is what is valuable; it is the man who creates his own values; by his choice he decides what he considers to be good because nobody willingly and knowingly, chooses what is bad.

Since existentialism is a philosophy of self, what then is their educational idea? The major aim of education according to this 'school' of thought is to enhance the learner's ability to decide correctly; help him develop his initiatives; search for and discover himself and to cultivate self reliance as a key character trait. There should be no attempt to integrate the learner into his environment. Given the individualistic nature of existentialism, the curriculum is intensively focused on the individual, his self-knowledge, and his self-choosing. The subject matters best suited o his emphasis are the humanities. Thus, painting, music, sculpture, literature, poetry, drama, dance, and the likes are paramount in the existentialist curriculum because they foster human introspection and the innermost consciousness of self and encourage choice based on private judgments of value and meaning (Mkpa: 58).

,On the method of teaching, existentialism stresses the Socratic method of dialogue, that involves the learner in the education process. Role-playing and drama is another method identified by the existentialists. In such a method as this, the learner imagines himself into the role he is playing and thereby has vicarious experience of the situation. The best teacher to the existentialists remains the full acceptance of the child at home irrespective of his deficiency. The pupil is understood to be an open possibility, a developing person full of potentialities. The teacher is expected to facilitate development, originality and creativity by providing necessary atmosphere conducive for such. The teacher is expected to allow freedom of opinion and discussion to reign in his class. He must not be intoxicated by his knowledge and authority, but rather welcomes challenges to his ideas from his students. The teacher must show care and concern for the student by sharing their joys and sorrows, and their hopes and aspirations. The teachers should allow his students even at tender age to choose what to learn.

As lofty as the existentialists' ideas on education are, in fact, without mincing words, they may be difficult to implement in practical classroom management. The idea of individualizing curriculum and teaching method appears to be illusionary in practical terms. Consequently, the existential curriculum will both allow learners a plethora of choices and the students will be free to select curriculum content, materials and activities. While this principle can easily lead to a 'laizzez faire' (anything goes) climate in the school, the hardened existentialist would claim that the corollary of free choice-moral responsibility-will, if insisted upon, prevent the eventuality of chaos (Adebayo: 45).

Conclusion

Fundamental to our discussions so far in this paper, is the fact that these 'schools' of thought represent the ideological foundation upon which a meaningful and effective system of education is based. In the history of ideas, educational developments in any part of the world are known to have been based on some sound educational philosophies. However, in view of our critical exposition of these various schools of thought, it is evident that no one 'school' can supply all the educational ideas a system needs to effectively cope with the challenges of learning process. In other words, none of the philosophical system is an iron cast without its flaws. None of the five 'schools' of thought discussed is exclusively sufficient to guide an educational system to reach its peak. In view of this therefore, it is our conclusion that a synthesis of the strengths of the different philosophical systems will produce an ideal philosophy of education in any given educational system especially in 21st century Nigerian educational system. In order to meet up with the challenges of modernity and perhaps, to evolve an integrated educational system in contemporary Nigeria, there is an urgent need to revisit the nation's philosophy of education. This is indeed timely in the light of the plethora of problems and decays evidently facing the nation's educational system. It is the contention of this paper that in the current efforts towards political and economic reforms in Nigeria, a neglect of the need for educational reforms, will truncate the entire process. The nations' educational system is in dare need of restructuring. A first step in this direction will be to evolve a strong philosophical foundation for a viable, virile and qualitative educational system in Nigeria. Towards this quest, this paper is making a clarion call to the stake holders in Nigerian educational system to cautiously note that a synthesis of the strengths of the different philosophical systems will produce an ideal philosophy of education needed in 21^{s1} century Nigeria.

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