



AFRICA AND EDUCATION

2030 AGENDA

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Edited by
J.A. ADEMOKOYA
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Abstract: *This paper attempted an examination of the importance of choice in educational theory and practice. Using the philosophical method, the paper critically analysed the concept of choice in the existentialist philosophy with particular reference to the practice of education as well as the shortcomings of the school of thought. The paper established that a system of education based on the existentialist concept of choice will make learners realise that their choices make them creators of their own world; they will be able to engage in prior deliberations to make meaningful decisions, it will encourage the spirit of self-reliance through personal involvement in practices, and develop ability to apply critical thinking. It was suggested that in order to achieve liberal education, critical pedagogy should be employed by teachers as well as other agents of education to ensure that learners make informed and valuable choices in life.*

Keywords: Existentialism, Choice in Education, Educational Theory, Nigerian Education

Introduction

The contemporary educational practice in Nigeria is confronted with the demands of producing learners who are capable of self-development through critical thinking and personal decision making, rather than turning out school graduates who can only rubber-stamp decisions taken on their behalf. It is alleged that the educational process has reduced learners' ability to make choices through a regimented educational design by which learners are denied the freedom to make choices and decisions (Afolabi, 2017). Parents have crippled the willpower of their wards because the latter are considered to be

too young or unable to decide for themselves. This paper therefore attempts an analysis of the existentialists' concept of choice, its limitations as well as implications on Nigeria's education in order to discover the importance of choice in education, and to see how a system of education based on the existential concept of choice will help learners make right/responsible choices and be ready to bear the consequences of choices made.

Choice and Existential Philosophy

Choice occupies the centre stage of the existentialist philosophy. It is an important concept in any ethical system. Humans make choice. It is human beings who decide what to value and attach meaning to things through the choices they make. Without human beings, nothing can be valued. Humans are the source of values. No value can impose itself on human freedom since it is human freedom that makes values exist simply by choosing them as values; and choice is the concrete actualisation of freedom. Therefore, to be free is to be compelled to make a choice.

The concept of choice is important in the business of education. It involves instilling in learners, the habits of respect for the worth and dignity of the individual as a thinking being who is capable of making rational decisions. Enoh (1995) stated that the emphasis on self-realisation in Nigeria's national philosophy of education is recognition of the worth of every individual. Choice provides the opportunity for individuals to make career options at very early stages of their educational life. The concept will undermine the undue influence wielded by parents in career choices.

Existentialism is a revolt against any kind of determinism, and affirmation of the free nature of man. A human is fundamentally free to create his essence. A human is not only free, but ironically, he is condemned to be free. He discovers himself. His essence comes first and he is now in the process of determining his essence. In the words of Okoh (2003), the existentialists ask questions like: Who am I? Does my life have meaning? What is my destiny? How do I confront choice?

Man is the focal point of existentialism rather than reality. To the existentialist, to exist is to be personally involved in the drama of life as an actor rather than as a passive spectator. To exist means to be personally committed to a freely chosen way of life. This implies being conscious of the problems of human life with all the choices opened to man and freely opting

for a certain way of life while assuming full personal responsibility for it (Omeregbe, 1991). To exist therefore, is to be at the helm of one's affairs, personally directing their main course. It means really living one's own life the way one has freely chosen and assuming responsibility for it. So, the main concern of existentialism is limited to the problems of man like poverty, sickness, anguish, hunger, etc in his existence. According to Seetharamu (2008), what occasions philosophical enquiry is not mere intellectual curiosity, but a crisis in the individual's life, which calls upon him to make a choice regarding his subsequent existence.

To choose is to commit the chooser. That is, every choice made involves personal commitment on the part of the chooser. The chooser is liable to full responsibility for all he has freely chosen. The implication of choosing is that choice makes man what he will become. But more agonising is the responsibility aspect of choices that one makes. If the existentialists reposed in man unlimited freedom to choose, they at the same time place squarely on the shoulders of the chooser, the responsibility for any consequences that may arise out of the choice he has made. According to Akinpelu (2005), citing Sartre, responsibility is:

... conscious acceptance of being the incontestable author of an event or of an object. It is the logical requirement of the consequences of man's freedom. According to Sartre, there is no God on whom one can blame the consequences. Now that man has no excuse because he creates himself, man bears responsibility for all that happens, whether through his conscious will, or through our facticity or any other accident.

In fact, as Sartre stated, there are no accidents in life, for there is no situation in life in which one cannot make a choice. Since man lives the life he has chosen for himself, it then means that the quality of life man lives depends on the quality of choice he makes. This may serve as warning to any person who might wish to interpret the 'freedom to choose' as a license to go beyond his frontier. So, the emphasis on responsibility clearly indicates the need for thorough pre-choice reflection in order that the choice one makes will not be parochial, but objective, reasonable and meaningful.

Implications of the Practice of Existentialism in the Nigerian Education System

With reference to existentialism, the method of pedagogy should allow for students' development of their own unique possibilities, which is why the existentialists would reject a standardised curriculum and an authoritarian model for teaching. An existential curriculum would include a diverse content as well as an array of varied pedagogical methods, which would include ample opportunities for peer-initiated and peer-directed learning.

Educators are to plan lessons that embrace and incorporate aspects of the student's emotional and intellectual dispositions. However, it is not only the aspects of one's unique life story that matter, it is also important that students understand the major role that history and heritage play in shaping who we become. History's authentic role does not only forge our past, but as well contributes to the future enactment of our possibilities that we gather from our heritage (Moris, 1990). The instructional methods employed should not resemble the outdated authoritarian model, where the teacher is the superior possessor of knowledge and the student, the vessel waiting to be filled. This model for pedagogy views knowledge in an objective manner from the student, and demonstrates no concern for the place of the existential 'lived world' in the curriculum as shared by both the teacher and the student. Knowledge, according to the existentialists, involves understanding situations from our 'lived world', and in addition, it is constructive. Thus, existential pedagogy stresses the co-creative, co-responsive, and co-participatory aspects of education. This is not to indicate that the teacher allows the student to dictate every aspect of his/her education, for the teachers need to be in command of the subject matter in order to first tailor it to fit the student needs. The teacher does not impart knowledge to students; he shows him how to acquire knowledge. The most difficult task for educators is to learn how to let students learn.

Existentialism goes deeper by applying effective strategies as well as overarching reasons why learners learn. Not only is knowledge being created, but it is interdependent on a self-constructed sense of identity and awareness. Students who apply deep personal meanings to what they are doing and learning will do so more effectively. Students have the freedom to do things their own way. Existential pedagogy is relevant to modern times. It is a beneficial educational theory. Existential pedagogy illuminates the core of

teaching and learning as personal quests to find meaning, define identities, and live authentically and freely. Existential pedagogy applies to learners of all ages in all learning environments. However, existential pedagogy may have particular relevance for adult and lifelong learning. Apart from this, adult and later-life learners pursue learning opportunities for existential reasons. They may be attempting to overcome issues relating to self-actualisation, achieve goals, overcome confusion, or define their identities in order to create and shape a sustainable future.

It is of great importance to know that the practice of education goes a long way in shaping the sustainable development of any society. But merely learning to know is different from learning to do. However, the theoretical framework of educational pedagogy should be good enough to ensure sound practical experience for the students. In relation to the existentialist view, more attention should be paid to students' personal encounter with reality through practical experience as this will instil critical thinking disposition to enable them make informed and valuable choices necessary for their sustainable future. As noted by John Dewey in his book *Education and Democracy*, the purpose of education is to train students for work by providing them with a limited set of skills and information to do a particular job. For Dewey, the school and the classroom teacher, as a work force and provider of a social service, has a unique responsibility to produce psychological and social products that will lead to both present and future social progress. Dewey noted that the business of the teacher is to produce a higher standard of intelligence in the community, and the object of the public school system is to make as large as possible, the number of those who possess this intelligence, skills, and ability to act wisely and effectively in a great variety of occupations and situations. This is a sign and a criterion of the degree of civilisation that a society has attained. It is the business of teachers to help in producing the many kinds of skills needed in contemporary life. If teachers are up to their tasks, they also aid in production of character (Dewey, 1904).

In relation to the philosophical view of the existentialists as discussed above, Tilbury and Workman identified the following five pedagogic skills essential to education for practical development of learners. They are:

1. Critical reflection: which includes the more traditional lecture with newer approaches such as reflexive accounts, learning journals and discussion groups.
2. Systemic thinking and analysis: which involves the use of real-world case studies and critical incidents, project-based learning, stimulus activities, and the use of the campus as a learning resource.
3. Participatory learning: this is based on the emphasis on group or peer learning, developing dialogue, experiential learning, action (researching/learning to act), and developing case studies with local community groups and business.
4. Thinking creatively for future scenarios: this is realised by using role play, real-world inquiry, future visioning, problem based learning and providing space for emergence.
5. Collaborative learning: it includes contributions from guest speakers, work-based learning, interdisciplinary/multi-disciplinary working, and collaborative learning and co-inquiry. (Tilbury and Workman, 2004)

The system of education that is based on the existentialist concept of choice will lead to the recognition of the worth and dignity of the learners. The school of thought recognises the fact that every individual is a thinking being and as a result, is capable of making his/her own rational judgment without being dominated by the crowd or what is referred to as the 'majority'. However, the concept of choice in education can develop rebellious habits in learners under certain circumstances; this establishes the authenticity and integrity of learners. Learners will be at liberty to apply critical thinking rather than submit to the pronouncement of an authority which if properly analysed, might be counterproductive.

Limitations of the Existentialist Concept of Choice

Existentialism has always been attacked for advocating individualism. Some existentialists like Kierkegaard and Sartre, constantly stress individuality in their philosophy to the extent of exaggeration. This level of autonomy advocacy could lead to indiscipline, non-conformity to the norms of the society, and lack of respect for authority. Existentialism to an extent, contradicts itself. This contradiction is visible between the individual nature and the social nature of man. In the first place, the existentialists stress the social nature of man, whom

they say, is a 'being-with-others'. But on the other hand, they stress man's singularity, individuality and uniqueness. Furthermore, the existentialist concept of freedom of choice is not synonymous with the ability to achieve one's aim. It does not say anything about the individual's ability to achieve a target choice freely made. That is why Omoregbe (1991), citing Sartre, asserts that it is necessary to point out to common sense, that the concept 'to be free' does not mean to obtain what one has wished, but rather to determine one's wishes through the sense of choice. In other words, success is not important to freedom.

Existentialism ignores the formidable influence of the environment and religious life. It ignores factors such as social class, race, tribe, age, sex and religion. It stresses that choices determine in totality, what one becomes in life. Thus, existentialism rejects that man's essence to a certain extent, is determined. However, despite the shortcomings in the existentialist philosophy, it is important that man must choose individual freedom in order to direct his existence and be saved from complete nihilism. The educational interest in existential phenomenology, according to Strain (1971), is the individual person, a living being of feelings and emotions, who must come face to face with himself and others. In essence, the person takes the society into consideration in the process of choosing, for instance, the course or career to pursue, since the profession must be socially based and acceptable. On the other hand, the person has to be individualistic and be personal for example, when sitting for examinations, since the proof of his/her knowledge acquisition will be demonstrated in his/her uniqueness during the assessment or examination.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Since choices are tied to responsibilities and consequences, the philosophy of existentialism emphasises the need for prior deliberation so as to make meaningful choices in order to encourage the spirit of self-reliance. It also enables the learner to be less dependent on teachers, parents or colleague because such dependence will not help to discover and realise who the learner is as an individual. The existentialist concept of choice will therefore make the learners realise that the choices they make in life will influence their own destiny, and they should be made to have an authentic reflection of this reality through practical experience since choice makes them the creators of their own

world. Choice in the existentialist philosophy will however teach Nigerian students how to 'care' and how to be 'involved' in relation to the Africa and Education Agenda 2030. These positive attitudes will influence the learners' behaviour while in school, and also, dictate the way they live even after graduating from the school.

Finally, the agony and anguish of accepting full responsibility for the learners' failure is emphasised in existentialism. Exposing learners to the existential concept of choice will inevitably develop in them, a conscious awareness and sensitivity to events around them rather than being mute and passive to life events within the confines of theoretical standard of learning.

From the analysis, it is suggested that the education of our nation in practice should aim at liberating individuals from limitations to their potentials of attaining desired development through their choices. In order to achieve this, the employment of critical pedagogy is encouraged for teachers as well as other agents of education so that development of critical thinking disposition to make informed and valuable choices will be inculcated in learners.

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