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Bakky Ngozi Adirika
Department of Educational
Foundations,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University,
Awka, Nigeria

Chinelo Oge Okonkwo
Department of Educational
Foundations,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University,
Awka, Nigeria

Onyebuchi Geoffrey Chiweyite
Department of Educational
Foundations,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University,
Awka, Nigeria

Correspondence:
Bakky Ngozi Adirika
Department of Educational
Foundations,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University,
Awka, Nigeria

Curriculum and essentialism through the eyes of educationists: Implications for Nigeria

Bakky Ngozi Adirika, Chinelo Oge Okonkwo, Onyebuchi, Geoffrey Chiweyite

Abstract

Philosophic issues always have had and still do have serious impact on schools and society. Our contemporary society and the schools are changing basically and in a rapid manner, much more than it was in the past. There is a fundamental urgency that prompts continuous appraisal and reappraisal of the role of schools, and the demand for philosophy of education. Indeed, without philosophy, educators will have no direction as to what and how to organize and implement within the school system. It is an established fact that our philosophy influences and determines our educational decisions, choices and alternatives. This is because curriculum consists of the totality of the environment that the school creates in order to stimulate and guide the wholesome growth and development of the children. Philosophy provides the starting point in curriculum development as it reflects on the total needs of the children, environment, schools and the society. It is a reflection of the totality of the human socio-economic needs that inspire the contents of curriculum. This paper therefore seeks to call the attention of Nigerian curriculum developers to the essentialism school of thought as its focal point in their renewal and redevelopment efforts.

Keywords: Curriculum, educationists, philosophic issues, Implications for Nigeria

Introduction

Essentialism is an educational philosophy whose proponents believe that children should learn the traditional basic subjects thoroughly. In this philosophical school of thought, the aim is to instill students with the "essentials" of academic knowledge, enacting a back-to-basics approach. Essentialism ensures that the accumulated wisdom of prevalent civilization as taught in the traditional academic disciplines, is passed on from teacher to student. Such disciplines might include Reading, Writing, Literature, Foreign Languages, History, Mathematics, Science, Art, and Music. Moreover, this traditional approach is meant to train the mind, promote reasoning, and ensure a common culture.

The function of philosophy of education can be seen as providing the root or the starting point in curriculum development. This can be seen in the view of Dewey (1916), when he contends that "philosophy may... be defined as the general theory of education". He further stated that "the business of philosophy is to provide the framework for the aims and method of schools. Whereas the Deweyian perspective provides a form of generalized meaning and understanding of the role of philosophy in educational curriculum it also moulds pattern of the curriculumists' thinking as he posits that it involves "an explicit formulation of the ... mental and moral attitudes in respect to the difficulties of contemporary social life". It is clear from this that philosophy is not just a starting point for schools; it is equally crucial and fundamental for all curriculum activities because education is the laboratory in which philosophical distinctions become concrete and are tested"

Greatly influenced by Dewey, the great curriculumist -Tyler's framework of curriculum also contains philosophy as one of the five criteria generally employed for the selection of educational purposes. The relationship that exists between philosophy and other criteria such as studies of learners, studies of contemporary life, suggestion from subject experts, and the psychology of learning constitute the foundation for the determination of school's purposes.

Much as philosophy is not the beginning or starting point of Tyler's curriculum, there exist a strong interaction on an equal basis with other criteria as he seems to have given prominence to philosophy in the development of educational purposes. This can be seen in Tyler (1949), assertion that the school serves as the first screen for developing social program when it attempts to define the nature of the good life and a good society.

Educational philosophies in democratic settings are likely to emphasize strongly democratic values in school. Indeed, there can exist no serious discourse on philosophy until the question of what education involves is understood. It is when this is established or done that we can start to pursue philosophy, aims, and goals of curriculum. However, to Goodlad (1984), the very first responsibility of the school is the social order, which he refers to as the "nation-state", but in many african cultures and societies, the sense of individual growth and potential is very paramount and fundamental.

The emergent duality, which is the "society versus individual has been a major philosophical issue even in western societies for centuries and was a very vital issue in Dewey's works. As it can be seen in the claim of Dewey (1916), education does not only desire "to make (good) citizens and worker", but also surely desires "to make human beings who will live life to the fullest". The creation of a compromise of the duality that exists between national allegiance and individual self-fulfillment is therefore a fundamental and sincere aim that should guide all curriculum experts from the means to the ends because when individuals grow and are prosperous, the society will surely flourish. This provides a logical response to the original question posed by Goodlad as to what education entails because since education implies the development of both the individual and the society, it really becomes a never-ending process of life, and the more refined the guiding philosophy the better quality the educational process.

In evaluating or considering the influence of philosophic thought on curriculum, there are various classification schemes that are possible but without attaching superiority status to any of them, will look more closely on essentialism.

Beginning of Essentialism

The Essentialist movement first began in the United States in the year 1938. In Atlantic City, New Jersey, a group met for the first time called "The Essentialist's Committee for the Advancement of Education." Their emphasis was to reform the educational system to a rationality-based system. The term essentialist first appeared in the book *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* which was written by Michael John Demiashkevich. In his book, Demiashkevich labels some specific educators (including William C. Bagley) as "essentialists." Demiashkevich compared the essentialists to the different viewpoints of the Progressive Education Association. He described how the Progressives preached a "hedonistic doctrine of change" whereas the essentialists stressed the moral responsibility of man for his actions and looked toward permanent principles of behavior. (Demiashkevich likened the arguments to those between the Socratics and the Sophists in Greek philosophy). In 1938, Bagley and other educators met together and Bagley gave a speech detailing the main

points of the essentialist movement, attacking the public education in the United States. One point that Bagley noted was that students in the U.S. were not getting an education on the same levels as students in Europe who were the same age. A recent branch has emerged within the essentialist school of thought called "neoessentialism." Emerging in the eighties as a response to the essentialist ideals of the thirties as well as to the criticism of the fifties and the advocates for education in the seventies. "Neoessentialism" was created to try to appease the problems facing the United States at the time. The most notable change within this school of thought is that it called for the creation of a new discipline, computer science. (Oakes, 1985)

Renowned essentialists William Bagley (1874–1946) was an important historical essentialist. William C. Bagley completed his undergraduate degree at Michigan Agricultural College in 1895. It was not until after finishing his undergraduate studies that he truly wanted to be a teacher. Bagley did his Graduate studies at the University of Chicago and at Cornell University. He acquired his Ph.D. in 1900, after which he took his first school job as a Principal in St. Louis, Missouri, in an Elementary School. Bagley's devotion increased during his work at Montana State Normal School in Dillon, Montana. It was there that he decided to dedicate his time to the education of teachers. It was also there that he published the book -*The Educative Process* which was what really helped in launching his name across the nation. Throughout his career, Bagley argued against the conservative position that teachers were not in need of special training for their work. He believed that liberal arts material was important in teacher education. Bagley also believed the dominant theories of education of the time were weak and lacking.

In April 1938, he published the *Essentialist's Platform*, in which he outlined three major points of essentialism. He described the right of students to a well-educated and culturally knowledgeable teacher. Secondly, he discussed the importance of teaching the ideals of community to each group of students. Lastly, Bagley wrote of the importance of accuracy, thoroughness and effort on the part of the student in the classroom. (Encyclopedia of World Biography, 2004)

Principles of Essentialism

Essentialism is a relatively conservative stance to education that strives to teach students the knowledge of a society and civilization through a core curriculum. This core curriculum involves such areas that include the study of the surrounding environment, basic natural laws, and the disciplines that promote a happier, more educated living. Other non-traditional areas are also integrated as well in moderation to balance the education. Essentialists' goals are to instill students with the "essentials" of academic knowledge, patriotism, and character development through traditional (or back-to-basic) approaches. This is to promote reasoning, train the mind, and ensure a common culture for all citizens. (Goodlad, 1984)

Essentialism is the most typically enacted philosophy in American classrooms today. Traces of this can be found in the organized learning centered on teachers and textbooks, in addition to the regular assignments and evaluations. It is not surprising that countries that admired american system of education have traces of essentialists views incorporated in their own systems of education.

Essentialism as a Teacher-Centered Philosophy

The role of the teacher as the leader of the classroom is a very important tenet of Educational essentialism. The teacher is the center of the classroom, so they should be rigid and disciplinary. Establishing order in the classroom is crucial for student learning; effective teaching cannot take place in a loud and disorganized environment. It is the teacher's responsibility to keep order in the classroom. The teacher must interpret essentials of the learning process, take the leadership position and set the tone of the classroom. These needs require an educator who is academically well-qualified with an appreciation for learning and development. The teacher must control the students with distributions of rewards and penalties. (Bagley, 1911)

Strengths of essentialism.

Education philosophies fall in two broad categories: student centered and teacher centered. Student-centered philosophies of education focus primarily on students' interests, needs and learning styles. Teacher-centered philosophies revolve around the teacher disseminating specific information to students in a systematic way. Essentialism is one of the most prominent teacher-centered philosophies of education that's practiced in modern American classrooms. (Akinpelu, 1981)

In an essentialist classroom, the teacher must be highly knowledgeable in the academic content. In the elementary grades, the content areas are primarily math, writing and reading. In secondary education, literature, natural science, math, language and history make up the core curriculum. The arts and social sciences -- or "soft sciences" -- are not considered important in an essentialist education, except as a means for transmitting American cultural values. Student interests are not considered in an essentialist classroom. Bagley believed that young people often develop interests in subjects they did not like at first. He felt it was the duty of teachers to expose students to important subjects, and students' interests would eventually follow. (Bagley, 1905) Teachers in an essentialist classroom must be role models for moral behavior. The goal of essentialism is to produce academically educated students who are well-versed in American culture and morality. This includes such traditional values as perseverance, respect for authority, pragmatism and consideration for others. Teachers are expected to embody these traditional virtues outside the classroom, as well as inside. (Wortham, 2006)

Adults are also responsible for imposing discipline in an essentialist classroom. Teachers must guide students by using strict, external discipline with fair and consistent consequences. Self-discipline, according to essentialist philosophy, will eventually develop from this outwardly imposed discipline. It is the obligation of teachers and school administrators to promote student self-discipline through daily guidance. (Wortham, 2006)

Essentialism is based firmly on a pass/fail system of education. Students must master grade or course content before being promoted to the next level. Essentialist educators place emphasis on standardized test scores as a means of determining mastery. Bagley himself was a proponent of failing students when they could not meet the accepted grade or test score standards. He felt that democracy required all students to meet the same level of achievement. In an essentialist classroom, students of

various ages and abilities would be taught the same curriculum. Students who have disabilities or limited English proficiency are taught with the same techniques and materials. Essentialists believe it is unfair to give students a different or less rigorous education based on their special circumstances. (Wortham, 2006)

An Existentialist Implication for Nigerian Education

From all indications, Nigeria as a developing nation is in a hurry to catch up with the rest of the industrialized world. Lots of caution, therefore, have to be taken to avoid the many pitfalls in our educational system as x-rayed by the Existentialist thinkers of Europe. The dictates of a modern technological society and the effects of an industrialized world tend to dehumanize the homo sapien, destroy his uniqueness, and his freedom. The teachers come face-to-face with these anomalies, and should aim at exposing and combating those forces of culture and society that are incompatible with the self-fulfillment and freedom of the individual child. In Nigeria today, evidence abound to justify the claim that there is a calculated attempt by society to 'swallow' up the individual, erode his freedom and reduce him just to a faceless entity in a crowd. This negates the tenets of existentialist's philosophy, and should be avoided in the Nigerian context.

To the Existentialists, education does not imply adjusting the learner to his environment or integrating him into the society; education implies helping him to develop his initiative, helping him search for and discover himself, and cultivating in him self-reliant traits. Application of this idea will expose students in the trying out of seemingly difficult tasks themselves. If this becomes a norm for the Nigerian student, the multiplicity of weaknesses that bedevil the system will naturally be put to serious checks.

Rote learning and lots of theorizing which characterize our schools today can in no way help the Nigerian child to discover himself. The Skills Acquisition Schemes of the eighties launched by the Rivers State Government was a step in the right direction toward helping the Nigerian child to develop his initiative and discover himself. The sooner our younger generation of school leavers inculcate in themselves self-reliant traits such as acquiring different competencies and skills, the better the times this country will look up to.

The call for care, concern and commitment on the part of teachers by the existentialists is one that is meaningful to the Nigerian school situation. The individualization of the curriculum and teaching method in Nigerian schools will be a welcome approach. The overcrowding of pupils in most of schools makes it impossible for the Nigerian teachers to be personally involved in the lives of the pupils. As a result, the Nigerian teacher scarcely knows the names of his pupils 'lumped' together in a class of over sixty pupils. In that situation, the teacher cannot share the joys and sorrows, the hopes and aspirations of his pupils. It is in such a classroom situation that the teacher is so distant from his pupils that the individuality of the child is lost in the 'crowd'.

On a cheerful note, the National Policy on Education, seems to embody the 'open possibilities' approach of the existentialist philosophy. The 6-3-3-4 educational policy is geared towards opening up possibilities for self-realization on the part of the individual. With the wide range of opportunities "for the acquisition of appropriate skills,

abilities and competencies' as provided for in the National Policy, no student will be deemed 'condemned' because he is a failure in academic subjects. This is a welcome development.

Criticism of Essentialism

Because Essentialism is largely teacher-centered, the role of the student is often called into question. Presumably, in an essentialist classroom, the teacher is the one designing the curriculum for the students based upon the core disciplines. Moreover, he or she is enacting the curriculum and setting the standards which the students must meet. The teacher's evaluative role may undermine students' interest in their studies. As a result, the students begin to take on more of a passive role in their education as they are forced to meet and learn such standards and information.

Furthermore, there is the speculation that an essentialist education helps in promoting the cultural lag. (Jewwit, 2008) This philosophy of education is very traditional in the mindset of passing on the knowledge of the culture via the academic disciplines. Thus, students are forced to think in the mindset of the larger culture, and individual creativity and subversive investigation are often not emphasized, or are even outrightly discouraged.

Conclusion

Existentialism has always been more of an attitude of mind rather than a well-defined philosophy. In its emphasis on the individual and the precarious nature of human existence, its most significant achievement in literature, art, psychology and social theory has been to counteract the continuing threat to individualism. So long as the total, technological and bureaucratic 'system' threatens to swallow up the individual, we will continue to turn to the existentialists to reassert the dignity and importance of the individual person. It is our belief that the authority's in-charge of education in Nigeria should take a closer look at the new philosophy of existentialism with a view to incorporating its educational ideas into the Nigerian education system. While for practical reasons it may be difficult to implement such lofty ideals as the individualization of the curriculum and teaching method, the need for most teachers in Nigeria to adopt existentialist teaching attitude of care, concern and commitment in their teaching activities to bring out the best in their students cannot be over-emphasized.

Finally, it is our belief that the existentialist philosophy has a lot to offer to the Nigerian educational system. When one remembers how our children are baked in educational factories, where as it were, they are processed and fashioned alike regardless of their personal uniqueness; or how our teachers are forced, in that they are forced, into teaching along lines laid down for them, we observe that this system alienates both pupil and teacher. Teaching, it should be noted, is not the imposition of one person on another, but rather a result of interaction between the teacher and the learner. Hence, the need for communication or activity between them which goes to confirm that for one to teach in a morally acceptable way, the teacher must be prepared to explain his actions by giving reasons for statements he has made and or offering reasonable defense for both his words and actions. It is only in this way, according to Paterson (1979), that the teacher shall give explicit account of the cognitive state of his pupil in terms

of his intelligence, aptitude and limitations, and the existing level of his knowledge, understanding and skill.

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