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Original Article

Richard Rorty's Philosophy of Education and the Place of Culture in the Educational Development of Africa

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ABSTRACT:

The Africa of today is facing a multifaceted crisis, ranging from insecurity, poverty, and a restless feeling of apathy. Despite some laudable attempts made to curtail or eliminate these predicaments, Africa still remains in the gloom of these crises. The basics of Africa's most topical problems remain the continuous loss of human capital due to the relentless problem of insecurity. This paper argues that Africa's revitalization and renaissance depends on the successful utilization of her human capital through education, for only an educated people can command the skills necessary for sustainable economic growth and development. Hence,

education is a necessary condition for the socio-economic development of Africa. Richard Rorty avers that for education to be utilized as a developmental tool for societal engineering, it must be both hermeneutical and pragmatic; that it must take into serious consideration the cultural peculiarity of the people, within which practical solutions are proffered to arrest the problems of the immediate society. It is our reasoned opinion in this paper that this type of education is what African societies need in order to tackle the avalanche of problems bedeviling the country.

KEY WORDS Philosophy, Education, Richard Rorty, Pragmatism, Culture,

INTRODUCTION

Richard Rorty, most undoubtedly, seems to be the most outstanding thinker on meta-philosophical issues in contemporary philosophy. His significance lies in his claim that "philosophy is best seen as a kind of writing" (Rorty 1982:92) which is accordingly "delimited, as is any literary genre, not by form or matter, but by tradition" (Rorty 1982:92). Discarding all claims to a privileged mental power that allows direct access to things-in-themselves, he offered an alternative description which establishes a thoroughly naturalistic approach to philosophy of education. Instead of looking for some fundamental fact about reality, Rorty recommends that we seek the justifications that are germane to a contextually embedded practice. This makes him a central figure both in the philosophical and

in the educational disputes of our day. His stance is not just engaging, but most importantly, possesses vital lessons for philosophy of education in Africa.

Although Africa has made significant progress towards the achievement of education for all and the Millennium Development Goals, a number of challenges continue to threaten the achievement of these goals. Educational quality among other's, remains the most serious challenge to education in Africa.

This paper suggests that for African educational system to achieve its *raison d'être*, the role of culture must be put into serious consideration. Basically, our work employs Rorty's philosophy of education as a framework, and draws out the significant lessons it holds for education in Africa.

RORTY'S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

To comprehend the philosophy of education of any given philosopher, we need to, first and foremost, appreciate the philosopher's epistemology. Richard Rorty's epistemology is an anti-foundationalist venture whose aim is to challenge all philosophical works that have their origin in foundationalism. In his critique of foundationalist epistemology, Rorty calls for a hermeneutic approach to epistemic issues, which is a method of immersion in which one submerges himself/herself into the phenomenon to be understood in order to understand it from the inside out. With this approach, one does not need to start out with fixed presumptions about what needs to be understood, but rather has to build up familiarity and then systematize the understanding he/she acquires later on. This, for Rorty, will put one in a privileged situation to pick up a "new angle on things" (Rorty, 1979:21).

Rorty's anti-foundationalism reached its zenith in his epistemological behaviourism, where knowledge is determined by behaviour within community. Knowledge therefore becomes a matter of "explaining rationality and epistemic authority by reference to what society lets us say, rather than the latter by the former..." (Rorty, 1979:174). As Rorty holds, "the crucial premise of this argument is that we understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief..." (Rorty, 1979: 170). Hence, he avers that "we see knowledge as a matter of conversation and of social practice, rather than an attempt to mirror nature" (Rorty, 1979: 171). Rorty's commitment to the conversationalist view of knowledge has the benefit of intensifying and broadening human solidarity. In fact, Rorty's view is that "human inquiry, as it ceases to be an attempt to correspond with an intrinsic nature of reality, becomes an exercise in human problem solving" (Nkemnole, 2014a: 52).

RORTY'S PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Rorty's influence among educators has been enormous. His philosophy of education is a search for the widest possible inter-subjective agreement (Rorty, 1994: 52). He deems the philosophies of education since Plato as problematic, as they confused the concept of knowledge with the purpose of knowledge. As he favours the purpose of knowledge over and above the concept of knowledge, he sees education as a process of socialization and training in criticism. As such, it should focus on the cultural convention in which one is being educated. He believes that all cultural expressions are to be appreciated and welcomed, so long as they do not lay claim to any objective truth.

Rorty thinks that it must be stated clearly and does not repudiate the scientific character of educational systems. On the contrary, he cherishes it, but adds the humanistic aspect to it. In his view, both the humanistic and scientific dimensions of education have important roles to play in the balancing of the educational process. For one, the humanities (as it was first conceived during the renaissance) and science (enlightenment) were movements that envisioned at emancipating man from authority; they started as revolts against authority (Rorty, 1997: 528). It is the humanistic dimension that

Rorty pictures epistemological foundationalism not only as an attempt to substitute the particularity and happenstance of our lives for a universal understanding of reality, but also as an obsolete standard which has been replaced by the new paradigm of pragmatism. An epistemology is foundationalist if it holds that knowledge is ultimately justified by reference to self-evident truths (Rationalism), or self-justifying mental states (Empiricism). It, therefore, presupposes an indispensable foundation beyond question. Owing to this, Rorty portrays foundationalist epistemology as "an attempt to escape from history" (Rorty 1979:9), a position which conflicts with historicism (the view that all human actions, including the ways we think, must be understood in terms of the particular historical time we find ourselves). Consequently, Rorty's epistemological project strives to purge epistemology of its foundational robes.

Rorty follows established pragmatists in maintaining that human activities, including human theories, are basically practice. He incorporates a naturalistic approach in which everything is relational, therefore accepting the view that we have no admittance to absolute justifications. In short, he offers a practice-oriented, naturalistic, anti-essentialist and fallibilist approach, where there is a transformation of knowledge acquisition into self-creation.

Rorty considers the thought of context-independent knowledge as a misguided endeavour. Only misapprehension causes one to believe that there is a target of inquiry beyond justification to particular audiences. For Rorty, all reasons are reasons for a particular community, restrained by spatio-temporal and social conditions. When we have justified our beliefs to a particular community, we need not make any auxiliary claims, universal or otherwise, which ushers in the role of culture in the education of the human individual.

Rorty's anti-Platonist stance in education, which draws insights from Gadamer and Dewey, finds its expression within and for particular epistemic communities. He argues that both Gadamer and Dewey put in place of Reason (the Platonic organ for truth identification) "a sense of tradition, of community, of human solidarity" (Rorty, 1997:254). Here, education is hermeneutical in the sense that we learn and comprehend things within the milieu of their historicity. Knowledge in this light does not refer to acquaintance with the universals, but points to insights of the traditions of the community. Knowledge, therefore, is acquired by living in a community and getting involved through passionate participation in one's epistemic society. In the words of Rorty, "education [is] aiming at a sense of human community, and of this community as foundationless, supported neither by sciences nor by history, but only by hope". (Rorty, 1997:530)

From the above explication, one can easily detect that Rorty's philosophy of education does not encourage the search for ultimate objective truth, his argument being that truth is linguistically conditioned, and as such truth

is nothing but a true statement in a certain cultural context. For him,

Learning is not a process of helping us to get in touch with something non-human called Truth or Reality (other-worldly, objective, ultimate, unchanging) rather it is what keeps us in touch with our potentialities. (Rorty, 1997: 525)

Inasmuch as Rorty sees education as a communal enterprise, it becomes a process which every individual must be involved in and take responsibility for. In these epistemic communities in question, some people have attempted to solve the problems bedeviling their community. These people should be part and parcel of the educational curriculum. That is why Rorty sees hero-worship as an important aspect of the educational process. There are heroes in every community and they have actually accomplished feats in and for their communities. The challenge of education is to identify the problems of the community in question and look at those heroes that have attempted to solve such problems without compromising our own responses to the problems.

PROBLEMS OF EDUCATION IN AFRICA: THE NIGERIAN AND GHANAIAN EXAMPLES

Formal education was introduced in Nigeria between 1842 and the late 1840s by the Christian Missions. First to come were the Wesleyan Methodists, followed in quick sequence by the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.), the Baptists and finally the Roman Catholics. The purpose of their education was to train teacher-catechists, interpreters, servants and cooks (Ajayi, 1963). As a result, their educational policies did not interrogate the cultural peculiarity of the community. These are the policies that formed the foundations of the Nigerian educational system, creating a big gulf between the people and their culture. Consequently, there is need for Nigerian education to be reviewed with a view to relating the curriculum to the culture, needs and aspirations of the Nigerian society (Adeyinka, 1993).

The progress of education in Nigeria is, thus, beleaguered by an array of problems, ranging from the responsibility for and control of the society's education, the diversification of the educational scheme, and especially the need to relate the schools' curricula to the culture of the people in order to successfully address the society's economic and developmental needs.

In Nigeria, the total disregard of the role of culture in educational matters is still largely unaddressed because of the degree of participation of the Church and the Government in the provision of education. This has led to the prevalence of confused systems of education in Nigeria. In a situation like this, uniformity is practically impossible and this has the possibility of unsettling the education of the students.

The role of culture should supersede the imported foreign systems. In other words, culture should set a

standard, a model of operation to be adopted by the Nigerian state. Hence, one chief aspect of education that has been quite often criticized in Nigeria is that education had not been adapted to the needs and aspirations of the people. The subjects and courses taught in our secondary and tertiary institutions are not related to Nigerian life and cultures. Disciplines, like Social Studies, Integrated Science, Philosophy, History and Political Science, which should bring out and celebrate the activities of Nigerians (and other African heroes), rather emphasize those of the Europeans. This has made education in Nigerian schools impractical, and unfit for settling the problems besetting the Nigerian society.

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Ghana's experience is not so far from that of Nigeria. The philosophy of education in Ghana is under great influence from external forces. This is traceable to the colonial rulers, who developed an educational policy that stressed the importance of character training through handwork, in order to produce obedient Africans (Yamada, 2005: 72). The goal was to make "blacks stop challenging the existing structure and start trying to fit into it" (Yamada, 2009: 37), thereby reproducing the existing socio-economic structure where black people occupied the lowest rung in society (Yamada, 2009: 39). The intention was to develop characters that would internalize the dominant values of society and maintain the status quo (Yamada, 2009: 38). Hence, the foundational educational philosophy introduced into Ghana by Britain was marked by racial views, where the subordination of blacks was justified by their "lower stage of moral development" (Yamada, 2009: 40). As such, the problem with developing the curriculum in Ghana became that of institutionalizing the Ghanaian culture (Yamada, 2009: 41).

Adjei (2007: 1047) summarizes Ghana's educational experience thus:

Although some educational gains were made in Ghana after political independence, Western control over what constitutes valid knowledge became increasingly and worryingly noticeable as schools were structured and restructured to validate only Western Knowledge. This knowledge became the

cultural capital by which individuals could access employment in both state and private organizations in Ghana.

IMPLICATIONS OF RORTY'S PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION FOR NIGERIA

More than five decades after Nigeria and other African countries gained independence, they are still struggling with chaotic educational systems. Western civilisation has succeeded in displacing the old order, but no new order seems to be in place. This has made education in most African nations more or less, a classroom activity, divorced from the social milieu. As most African educational system have suffered distortion, so has African development in general. Definitely, "colonial legacies embodied in post-colonial African states and sustained by neo-colonial imperialism constitute the main obstacle to development in Africa" (Nkemnole, 2014b, 125).

Culture is all-pervading in the lives of individuals and societies, and societies which have constructed their mode of living together socially, and have organized their public life and institutions in consonance with the social realities and values of their culture, tend to be stable.

Kluckholm and Kelly (1945) defines culture as all historically created designs for living, which exist at any given time as potential guides for human behavior. For Lederach, "culture is the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing and responding to the social realities around them" (Lederach, 1995: 9). For K. C. Anyanwu, culture is "a common living experience shared by a people" (Anyanwu, 1983: 21). Anyanwu further holds that:

All forms of experience (personal and impersonal, scientific and religious, political and moral) stem from the living experience, which constitutes the root of life... Man builds up a culture because he has an inner life which originated from an experience which itself has an inner meaning and which asks for meaning. The primary function of culture is to communicate an answer to that question and to satisfy the demand for meaning (Anyanwu, 1983: 21).

From the above descriptions, it is crystal clear that culture has the function of setting agenda for a people's education. Where culture does not aid the educational system in tailoring its courses and institutions, students face the crisis of civilization. Therefore, for African educational systems to respond to the social realities

In Rorty's philosophy of education, education which is meant to serve the human society is directed towards inculcating a society's cultural values that will predispose one to have commitment to the goals that guide the particular community in question, with a self-critical stance in which nothing is foundationally and fundamentally untouchable. This being the case, African universities and other institutions of learning should strive to re-write their educational curriculum to define and inculcate the cultural heritage of the African societies in the students.

From the above discourse, we discern that culture is the bedrock of societal education and the fabric with which the society is woven together. According to B. O. Oloruntimehin (2007: 15):

inherent in its environment, it must interact with African cultures. By so doing, our universities and other institutions of learning will cease being certificate factories, with little or nothing to offer to Africans. Hence culture is quite tangential to excellence in any educational system.

Basically, when we interrogate the status quo, we notice that African educational systems have lost touch with their host cultures, and instead have embraced Western cultural values. As Bewaji (2007: 411) avers:

... while they are 'knowledgeable' in the white man's book information and in wanton individualism, they lack the intellectual and cognitive culture necessary for the appreciation of contemporary social, economic and technological dynamics...

This predominant educational orientation in Africa today, which bends towards belief without justification and knowledge, has inclined us to the unfortunate orientation of almost passive observation of things and processes, the sort of orientation that takes for granted ideas and social practices received from other cultures. This explains why we adopt foreign cultures without considering their adequacy for our immediate given human situation. Indeed, it seems to be one of the major contributing factor to our over reliance on others for thoughts and solutions to our pressing problems and our failure to make our mark in this new age of discovery. In

fact, "the acceptance of the culture of an alien ruler as being superior to the indigenous culture, has led to the adoption of such a culture as a model... The consequences have included ignorance of African cultures..." (Oloruntimehin, 2007: 16). African intellectuals and policy-makers should quit this predominant philosophy of education, which favours the transfer of information, as opposed to the development of the capacity for creativity; one which is, therefore, essentially imitative rather than creative.

There is a serious need for "... a cultural evolution" (Rorty 1999: 38), an awareness that can predispose African intellectuals to approach our present educational dilemma with philosophic insight and use the provisions of African cultures to restudy and reformulate the principles which will inspire the youths of today in order "to build securely on foundations that can endure so as to provide a safe habitation for the African of tomorrow" (Okafor, 1947: preface). Africans should avail themselves of the provisions of their cultures in educational reconstruction, so as to address the basic issues on problems that confront their immediate community. Education should no longer be disconnected from culture, as this disconnect has had and will continue to have its destructive consequences on the community and its search for development and progress.

Central to Rorty's philosophy of education is the capacity and ability to examine and scrutinise, in the manner of Socrates, our cherished beliefs and notions, with the view of ensuring that whatever we claim to know is supported with good reasons. In this sense, knowledge becomes a tool of self-appraisal and self-understanding without which our search for meaning and development is impossible.

The attitude being exhibited by most African education experts towards the development of a culture-based educational system in Nigeria is discouraging, and lacks critical depth. Our universities, thus, keep producing

graduates who are good in English, French and Mathematics, but lack the necessary critical thinking to tackle native community needs.

African universities should, as a matter of necessity and urgency, should review the use of educational schemes and policies that bear no relevance on our cultures and existence. If the status quo is not restructured to challenge African scholars to harvest the richness of their cultural heritage for educational ends, the overall result will be an assemblage of persons who know much of a few, where each stands on his own existential space without the awareness of his importance in the greater scheme of things. This kind of situation reminds us, according to Rorty, that "critical thinking is playing off alternatives against one another, rather than playing them off against criteria of rationality, much less against eternal verities." (Abellanosa, 2010: 102).

In all, African educational experts should not shy away from challenging the status-quo. They should, without fear or favour, call for an African educational renaissance through the instrumentality of culture. They must not withdraw from assuming their roles as leaders of thought. They have the task of 'inculturating' themselves, their fellow citizens and the whole educational system. In doing this, they must desist from "the luxury of dogmatism in any form" (Masolo, 1988: 36).

CONCLUSION

Rorty's philosophy of education rests on two theoretical frameworks, namely, hermeneutics and pragmatism. While the former encourages the learner to be immersed in the object of knowledge, the latter questions the practical value of the knowledge in question. Consequently, Rorty's philosophy of education lays emphasis on the role of the cultural community in search for truth. As Anyanwu (1983: 117) avers:

Knowledge is not a fact in the world, not an information or the enumeration of facts. Rather, it is a complicated act of judgment in which our interest, personalities, experiences, sensitivities, and commitments are greatly involved; and this is true especially in the realm of cultural knowledge.

Here, education is a societal activity where the people learn how to cope with their environment and solve the problems they encounter. It therefore underlies the need to create a community. This is the philosophy of education that Africa lacks, but needs. It is the brand of educational standard that will make us to pay more attention to our cultural peculiarity and utilize it, educationally, for development.

Conclusively, there is a pressing need for us to re-orientate our minds and put into creative use our cultural heritage for a better pragmatic and hermeneutical education. This, if done, will in the long run, chart the way for the much needed, and long awaited, African renaissance.

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