

SOCRATIC PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION AND THE NIGERIAN CHILD

Florence Ikponmwen IYAMU

Institute of Education (Ekehuaan Campus), University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria
Email: florence.iyamu@uniben.edu

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Philip Osarobu ISANBOR

Department of Philosophy, St Albert Institute, Kagoma.
Adjunct Lecturer, Department of Educational Foundations, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria
Email: osarobuisanbor@gmail.com OCHID ID: 0000_0002_9128_6467

Abstract:

Socratic conception of the human person is dependent on the power of reasoning, and this depends on the contents of knowledge of the society constantly imposing on the child. The mind is the seat of knowledge and wisdom, on its capacity and capability to project beyond what the sense can offer to the human person and society. This conception of a child as a being of reasoning is informed by Socratic didactic method of learning, and it directs the belief that the mind of a child need to be educated with the right contents of knowledge properly. This directs Socratic projection of what the educational contents of the human person should be and what it should be dependent on as contents of its curriculum, to be based on what the society imposed on the mind of the child. Hence, the paper is concerned with the analysis of the ethical implication of Socratic philosophy of education, as with the reflective examination of the values placed on the contents of the minds, as the very seat of knowledge, even beyond the capacity and capability of the sense, in informing what should be considered as the contents of human education, especially in the face of the growing influences of scientific methodology in attaining and establishing knowledge claims and contents, as it is related to the Nigerian educational development through the provision of vibrant early childhood education. Employing evaluative tool of analysis, therefore, the paper concludes that the Socratic philosophy of education remains very relevant for the development of the society, and for moral basis of Nigeria's educational curriculum and contents in relation to child development in the midst of conflicting contemporary values.

Keywords: Knowledge, Human Mind, Child, Reasoning, Socratic Method, Imagination, Philosophy of Education

Introduction

Socrates was speculated to have been born around 470 BC, and in his early life served as a soldier. He came from humble family in which his father was a sculptor and mother, a midwife (Lawhead 34). Due to his closeness to nature and ability to interpret the workings of nature, he was regarded as the first thorough, systematic and ordered philosopher, based on the critical nature of his thinking and rationality. According to Socrates, the issues of the development of the human person, especially from an early childhood education rest on what informed the minds over times (Osawaru & Isanbor 41). According to Socrates, the real development is a product of human reasoning, and the contents of one's reasoning depend on one's disposition to nature and its happenings. One of the most memorable eras in the history of western philosophy is the Golden Age or better still the Socratic Era. It is an age of reasoning. This is because of the great impute of the various philosophers in this age starting with Socrates down to Aristotle. Socrates is the first of the three greatest Greek philosophers in the Golden age and that is why that period is also ascribed to his name: Pre-Socratic, Socratic, Post-Socratic eras).

With the development of philosophical enterprises, Socrates is regarded as father of idealism as a philosophical method and disposition of interpretation of realities and non-realities. This is borne out of the existential examination of idealists' concern for perennial and ultimate truths and their notion that education is largely a matter of passing on the cultural and moral heritage to next generations. Education is the understanding of the self in relations to other education, and this, according to him, will be more when such self-awareness starts from early childhood. As an adherent of idealism as the basis of real, true and reliable education, the individual as a subject of lived experiences is to exercise the following characters of development:

- To have high cognitive level of education based on idealistic principles;
- To ensure spiritual development, since the idealistic educationists give greater importance to spiritual values in comparison with material attainment;
- To promote good personality traces for integral humanism;
- To have comprehensive, systematic, and holistic approach to life and living;
- To promote the principles of self-realization and self-reliance:

Socratic knowledge of development posited that the greatness of the human person as a subject of lived experience rests solely in his or her personal character. This is a product of his or her reasoning which is engineered by the kind of education he or she acquires (Kanu & Isanbor 223). With this conception of development, Socrates has had considerable influence both on his contemporaries and subsequent generations. He had the habit of always going into a trance and remaining lost in thought for a long period of time. Socrates claimed to have been guided all his life by an interior voice, a divine oracle (Daimonion) (Omogbe 31). His philosophical thoughts were grounded on his 'Dialectical method' which involves seeking or getting knowledge through asking questions and getting answers. He believed so much in conversation rather than writing or publishing books. This is evident in his life as he is regarded as the only philosopher in the Golden Era that did not have a book ascribed to his name rather, his thoughts were worked on by some of his contemporaries most especially Aristotle.

From the Socratic tradition, education in a philosophical context is a process of probing into the contents of the mind, as the mind is seat of knowledge and hallmark of development. Although, various philosophers down the ages have given their personal contribution on the notion of education as a philosophical discipline, but the Socratic philosophy over ages has demonstrated a viable means of forming the human person through the didactic method of learning. This method shows the relationship between the wise and the learners in the quest to sustain some particular ways of living and in the understanding of nature (Osawaru & Isanbor 43). To many, Socratic thinkers: Plato, Aristotle, St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, the significance of education in society is an aspect of our daily life that cannot be toiled with due to the facts of its great benefits to people and the society. The aspect of education of various philosophers of the different epochs of philosophy in the Western states have their various dimensions especially in regards to what influenced their thoughts, or rather, the foundation of their different thoughts.

It is the concern for the development of the mind that the paper aims to assess the contemporary relevance of Socratic philosophy of education, and then evaluate the applications of such philosophy for the development of the Nigerian child. This is based on the philosophical and existential conviction that every person is a child of reasoning, and such, the essential development of the individual is advisable, as recommended by Socratic Method of learning, to start at early education. This conviction holds that the society is a product of human reasoning, and such knowledge of development seats in the mind.

Hence, the paper details its analysis through the following headings: What is Philosophy of Education? The Basis of Socratic Philosophy of Education; A Learner as a Child of Reasoning in Socratic Philosophy of Education; Socratic Philosophy of Education and the Development of the Nigerian Child, and then, an informed evaluative conclusion.

What is Philosophy of Education?

The understanding of philosophy of education is precipitated on the general notion of philosophy and its applications in the development of the human person and the society. It is about the applications of philosophical tools, theories, ideologies and principles in understanding educational contents, values and development of a particular society (Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 23). The philosophical look at education and its roles in human and societal development is always keen, because philosophy tries to examine to the disposition that led to any curriculum, as philosophy is a way of life, and education helps in any regard of human and societal development. Philosophy of education is the branch of practical philosophy concerned with the nature of education, as well as the philosophical issues that can arise from educational theory and practice.

The major philosophies of education can be divided into three main types: teacher-centered, student-centered, and society-centered philosophies in achieving the specified educational goal and objectives of a particular society. (Kanu & Isanbor 222). Also, philosophy of education refers to the examination of the goals, forms, methods and meaning of education. The term can be used to describe the fundamental philosophical analysis of these themes and analysis of practical pedagogical approaches (Kelly 42; Omoregbe 30). Its subject matter includes both basic philosophical issues, such as the nature of the knowledge that is worth teaching and learning and the state of educational justice as well as problems concerning practical educational policies and practice, such as standardized testing or the social, economic, and legal implications of school funding.

Socratic Philosophy of Education

Socrates was one of the golden age philosophers and in many literature; he is regarded as the father of philosophy, especially in the area of idealism as the basic of philosophical enterprises. He propounded his own theory about education (Ogbonnaya 71). Although; it is recorded that Socrates never wrote anything; but his teachings and philosophies greatly influenced his followers especially Xenophanes and Plato, and who carried out his thoughts of human development meaningfully. Thus, Socrates' own way of teaching was so unique and different from that of Plato and Aristotle his students because Socrates believed that education is not a process of learning, but a dialectical means of questions and answers. Unlike Plato and Aristotle, Socrates did not teach people in an institution, school or in a particular place. He only rambled through streets, gardens, squares in Athens with his followers while he debates about things such as law and justice, beauty politics, way of life, and so on (Cooper & Hutchison 22). In Socrates view, everything is liable to questions, answers and criticism.

Socrates on Immortality of the Soul: In the dialogue of Plato's *Meno*, Socrates held that our souls are immortal and the same thing can be applied to our knowledge, but every time we are born again, we lost the knowledge, and thus we must educate ourselves to remind us of our lost knowledge (Cooper & Hutchison 85). Thus, he emphasized that it is not teaching, but a merely reminding of what have been known, to be the truth, which is already inside us (Kanu & Isanbor 224). Hence according to Socrates to stir up the truth within us, we only need to employ question and answers the method known as dialectic method. Furthermore, Socrates also highly rejected Sophists' idea which states that wisdom is a rational knowledge which ought to serve primarily, to self-centered interests.

Socrates' Dialectical Method: It is obvious that Socrates' notion of education was the most liberal one and without any further edict, or examinations. It was only about individual's readiness to participate in the debate, that is, it is not necessarily for all but only those who wish to acquire more. Socrates encouraged his followers to think critically to expand their knowledge because it allows us to understand better the world that surrounds us (Cooper & Hutchison 22). For him, we can educate ourselves only by critical thinking, questioning our beliefs and discovering answers to the questions. Socrates has it that philosophy is the far reaching quest for wisdom, though this quest is never-ending because we simply cannot find all answers such a question of the afterlife, which Socrates himself reflected before he was executed (Kanu & Isanbor 224).

Socrates' Idealistic Education: Idealistic education or learning activities are those that are solely gotten and conceived by the mind. Socrates was an idealistic philosopher whose teachings greatly influenced Plato. This is because Plato was a faithful follower in promoting idealistic model of learning (Uzomah & Isanbor 196; Kanu & Isanbor 223). Socrates is known for this strong belief that knowledge can be derived by ways of remembrance or reminiscence. For him, every man is born with innate knowledge, in learning, we learn nothing from experience, and rather, teaching and experience only make us conscious of our innate ideas. It is about the human person understanding himself or herself in reference to the values of the society he or she lives. According to Harris Odimegwu:

Man does not only need to be an individual. He or she also requires a consciousness of his or her individuality for the constitution of his or her personality. Consciousness refers to man's awareness of his or her oneness, identity or individuality through time and space.... the question of identity is also geographical for man exists in time and space, and his or her consciousness of his or her personality is characterized by locatedness. There is a particular location on the earth that he or she calls his or her own and by which he or she identifies himself or herself. This is part of what gives meaning to his or her life and constitutes to the constitution of his or her personality. This place, he or she calls home and away from it, he or she feels he or she is on a journey. The ecology, the environment, the climate, the weather of this place all contribute to his or her understanding of himself or herself and the consciousness of his or her existence and personality (316-317).

Socrates on Moral Education: The idea of Socrates survived in Plato's Dialogues, although Plato later followed significantly less liberal opinion when it comes to education. Being a moralist, in his philosophy of education, Socrates emphatically stressed the central place of moral development in education. Socrates' concept of education was closely tied and more associated to the concept of virtues such as prudence, courage, temperance and justice. However, virtue for him is the firm and habitual disposition to do well (Uzomah & Isanbor 195). That is, virtue is a continuous act of exhibiting good characters which is nurtured and preserved by the individual, and by which he acts and relates with others in the society. He has the notion of justice as universal for all people, while other virtues are connected to particular class of individuals based on their profession and desired contribution to the society (Kanu & Isanbor 226). Subsequently, education should teach the specific group of people to maintain a balance associated with certain virtue such as a balance of temperance for artisans, prudence for political leaders or courage for soldiers (Cooper & Hutchison 23). He also believes that education is a necessary to free key for individuals from their primal state of ignorance and sensually driven being, and people need to be educated. This could be link to his explanation of the allegory of the cave.

A Learner as a Child of Reasoning in Socratic Philosophy of Education

It is through thinking and reflections that ideas are made. Ideas rules and direct the world. This is evident in the works of Socrates whose emphasis is on the innateness of the human person as a subject of lived experiences. It is through the development of ideas that knowledge is obtained and sustained. For Socrates, everyman is pregnant with knowledge just waiting to be delivered from, especially when with problems and challenges to be solved. Socrates method of dialectics or the dialectical method, is one that centered on the process of questions and answers. However, going through this work, we come to the understanding of the importance of questions and answers in the derivation of knowledge. For through this process one is able to bring out that innate knowledge that is hidden within him or her. The Socratic method of learning presents the relevant framework for students to engage actively in the critical thinking process (Kanu & Isanbor 227). Socratic inquiry is emphatically not teaching in the conventional sense of the word this is because the “leader is not the purveyor of knowledge” (*The Socratic Method*) that is the teacher does not only spread or promote a particular idea or view but through dialectics brings out knowledge from the student. The Socratic teacher is not the sage on the stage but only provides a guide for the student (*The Socratic Method*).

The Socratic Method conceiving it from the classroom experience is a process of learning in form of a dialogue between the teacher and the student. Both the teacher and the student push the dialogue forward through questioning. The teacher or leader of the inquiry raises probable questions in a bid to expose the thoughts of the participants on a particular subject of inquiry. Through questions the values, principles and beliefs held by the student are made known to the teacher unlike other forms of learning wherein the teacher pours out his knowledge about a particular reality to the student without the student's inputs or without stirring up critical reflection from the student (*The Socratic Method*). More so, Socrates moral education focuses on the need to teach and instruct the learners or students on the basic principles of virtue and necessary moralities to follow in order to be a well-developed person in the society (Kanu & Isanbor 228). It went further to asserts the need for one to be moral that is, knowing good and bad, to develop a conscience that brings growth and development in the society. Therefore, Socrates philosophy of education helps in the appreciation of the human person and the ability of one to be able to contribute a token to the welfare of the society. For each man is endowed with innate (ideas) or knowledge which need only to be brought out. Thus, each student should be encouraged by their teachers to use their innate ideas or knowledge through the process of questions and answers (Dialectics).

One of the major criticisms leveled against Socratic Method of learning is that the inquiry is open ended. This simply means that the discussion has no pre-determined argument that the teacher aims at leading the student. This is evident in the fact that the perspective from which a student conceive or views a particular question might be different from the point of view of the teacher and as such the direction of learning is been shifted away from the teachers perspective. Also most scholars have asserted that the Socratic method of learning is only applicable to moral education that is how one ought to live (Kanu & Isanbor 228). In Socratic Method of learning, instead of the teacher making arguments or asking questions designed to convince any or all people in a particular subject matter, the teacher engages the students in a discussion which aims at bringing out the students input on a particular subject of inquiry through questioning. The subject of inquiry that the students present to the teacher are not thought about the world in general rather they are what individual student thinks or says about the world. Moreover, the Socratic Method of learning have been criticized by some scholars and highly discouraged to be practice in the classroom environment because it is characterized by productive discomfort. Through the process of questioning there is the tendency of tension arising among students whenever they are been called to account for a particular subject of inquiry. Hence, most scholars

have asserted that the Socratic Method is best used to demonstrate complexity, difficulty and uncertainty instead of it been used as a learning process within the classroom environment.

Socrates Philosophy of Education and the Development of the Nigerian Child

To change the trajectory of national development, the Nigerian child is demanded and expected to think critically and reasonably through the education of their minds. The sole mark of Socrates philosophy is based on the principle of dialectics, that is, the act or process of dialogue. From many indications, the National Policy on Education (NPE) of Nigeria has one of its goals which is the inculcation of morals and national consciousness which will bring about the unity of the society as a whole. The policy also signifies the direction of national development to be on the values of the human person inherent in all levels of education, owing to the place of qualitative and quantitative thinking and reasoning for the generations of ideas. The objectives of NPE are seemed to be achieved on the provisions of qualitative and quantitative education, based on the following rationales:

- a. To respect for the worthiness and dignity of the individual as a person
- b. To have faith in one's ability in making rational decisions
- c. To develop moral and spiritual principles in interpersonal and human relations
- d. To have shared responsibility for the common good of the society
- e. To promote physical, emotional and psychological development in all children
- f. To acquire competencies that are necessary for self-reliance and self-liberation.

However, Socrates method of education which involves the process of questions and answers in the process of helping the students to discover their innate knowledge of those concepts that they are been taught for the idealistic development of the human person as a subject of lived experiences and the society. As for the quest for national development it is indispensably linked to the educational policy formulation and national developmental planning based on the values of human thinking and reasoning through proper idealistic education of every Nigerian child, Afariogun posits that:

The policy on education as we may say is the statement of educational goals of a people, community, state, and nation and so on. It means a procedure and method of implementation, content, and guideline of education and the agents responsible for formulation and implementation of the educational goals. It could also mean the general rules or guidelines which direct or governs decisions relating to school admission, results, finance, recruitment, management, structure and other related matters. It also extends to objectives, philosophy, goals, evaluation, implementation, content of the education process and the way to achieve the objective and goals (70).

More so, Socrates emphatically stressed the central place of moral development in education. He maintained that education should foster in the child or pupil the required dispositions to do things because of their moral worth (Uzomah & Isanbor 195), and then, informed their characters that should direct the conscience towards the promotions of the courses of national development. Although, the emphasis of Socrates on the moral development of the child is one developmental thought that is not visible today in our educational system. This is because most of our educational facilities are devoid of the contents and abilities to inform the minds of the learners through qualitative and quantitative reasoning. Some of the educational facilities have become avenues for breeding different immoral acts and other questionable characters as a result of the environmental contents that are informing the minds of the learners, especially from their early childhood education.

It is therefore pertinent that we try to bring back the tradition of inculcating on our pupils the necessary moral upbringing that would enhance our national development as a nation. For this reason, there is need for a radical change in the way and manner through which children are taught in our schools. Hinged on the Platonic philosophy of education, knowledge is reminiscence, that is, education is the process of remembering, and hence the role of the teachers and lecturers is to guide the students in the exercise of remembering through the process of questions and answers (Kanu & Isanbor 229). The enabling environment of learning should be provided for the children in order to have good environmental experiences that can positively informed their thinking and engender their good characters for their development and that of society. The lack of these provisions has being the bane for our development, as education is the bedrock of growth and development, and the values and contents of qualitative and quantitative thinking. It is important for a learner to be able to ask questions in the process of a class or lecture which thus aid the student in been able to recall those innate knowledge within.

Again, Socrates holds that the concept of the soul as immortal and immaterial, and also as an epitome of the totality of knowledge, and that, the whole truth of reality and human existence lies innately in the human soul (Ogonnaya 71). Hence learner's only contribution to knowledge is that it activated the inactive ideas and powers of the human person. For this activation and development is vital for the moral and intellectual formation of the human person for the self-realization and self-development (Uzomah & Isanbor, 196). With this ideology, Socrates believed that education should help in the discovering of truth, reality and to eliminate doubt. This implies that, learning should enlighten the mind in other to ease the same of illiteracy and unwariness to deception.

This focus of Socrates has a lot to say with the Nigerian system of education as the Nigerian society is very desirous to change the thinking nature and contents of every average Nigerian child towards the attainment of integral development. This is dependent on the provision of qualitative and quantitative educational environments and facilities necessarily to engineer and engender avenues of reasoning, that help informed the minds. Our learning process has gone the other way round, instead of helping students to attain that state of enlightenment free from ignorance and gullibility, for the hallmark of education according to Socrates is one that is principally focused on moral development. Education ought to morally help us orientate the students that obedience to one's conscience is the absolute. The visibility of this point on our educational system is not possible, for every day we are presented with different set of persons who come out of our educational institutions whose moral principles are no were to write home about.

Conclusion

Having critically examined the Socratic philosophy of education, one can conclusively assert that it cannot be applicable to all educational fields, but it remains a philosophy of the minds which is concerned with the capacity of changing the individual and the society through proper idealistic education. We know that in science, there are some basic knowledge which the teachers necessarily need to impart into the students without any form of dialectics, this is because the students mind is *tabula rasa* that is completely blank of such specific inquiry of development. In this kind of situation the Socratic method of learning should not be adopted (Ogonnaya 78). Hence, the Socratic philosophy of education is best applicable and suitable for moral education and character formation. For this, both teachers and students in schools should be very reflective, using the power of mental ability, in generating ideas and solutions in solving societal problems and challenges, which also require them to develop complex and understandable conceptions of professional growth and development, and to monitor the various changes in society and how things develop over times (Kanu & Isanbor 232; Arikpo 172; Obioha 215). it remains

a philosophy of development of the minds which is hinged on the valuation of the human person and his or her relationship with the other persons in the society, and sustains the belief the minds remains the seat of truth and other virtues for the development of the educated.

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