

Philosophy for Children: A Model for Unhu/Ubuntu Philosophy.

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Abstract- The African communitarian way of life, unhu/ubuntu, has suffered unprecedented decline in recent years. This is mainly attributed to cultural pluralism. Notwithstanding the decline in morality, unhu/ubuntu still exists. The essentials of unhu/ubuntu must continually get emphasis from societal institutions. It is for this cause that this paper seeks to justify the use of philosophy for children model in schools to foster unhu/ubuntu. A brief account of unhu/ubuntu will be given. The philosophy for children model will be discussed relative to ubuntu. Lastly the paper will suggest ways of employing philosophy for children to revive unhu/ubuntu.

Index Terms- Ubuntu; philosophy for children

I. INTRODUCTION

Pre-modern Africa was characterised by an enduring moral fibre which sustained traditional societies. The main force behind this cultural moral presentation was the philosophy of ubuntu. This entails an African communitarian way of life which can be easily summed up by the popular aphorism, “a person is a person through relationships with other people”. In African traditional societies an individual was defined according to the environing community. Everything was viewed in terms of common good, even individual talents were treated as common assets (Makuvaza, 1996; Samkange and Samkange, 1980). Immorality by an individual was a disgrace to the whole community. On the other hand, the success of a community member was a community’s success. This was because any behaviour pattern was supposed to be a reflection of the community’s values. Although not much formalised, traditional education had the main aim of producing people who were acceptable in that particular community. Ubuntu was not confined to individual communities as the values could be exhibited beyond the bounce of these communities.

The advent of political societies (when central governments emerged) and general cultural pluralism brought with it adverse effects on African morality. There is high incidence of moral degeneration in Zimbabwe today (Nziramasanga, 1999). This can be attributed mainly to a culturally plural environment in which children are socialised. The community group ethic which subjected all children to some form of discipline from any old person has declined. Formal schools have become critical places for children’s moral development as they spend most of their time at these institutions starting from a tender age. It is therefore imperative to resuscitate the African moral ethic, ubuntu, through exploitation of philosophy for children advocated by Lipman at Montclair University in the 1970s

(Kennedy, 2000; Daniel and Auriac, 2009). This philosophy, if adopted in an African setting, is hoped would resuscitate the declining African morality. This may be done in light of the methodologies used in philosophy for children which are compatible with African traditional moral values. It can be argued that if these values begin to have emphasis at a tender age through the education system, ubuntu can be realised. It must, however, be appreciated that ubuntu can no longer be captured in its pre-modern genre due to cultural dynamism (Makuvaza, 1996). The essentials can be instilled in learners for cultural moral revival. Our argument is that, since the concept of philosophy for children has distinct overlaps with African moral values, its introduction at an early age is expected to foster communal and democratic ethics among other values espoused by ubuntu. This will in turn lead to a society with morally upright citizens who respect fellow citizens, tolerate people of diverse cultures and citizens who work towards common objectives for the betterment of the society.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This piece of work is mainly hinged on the nature of philosophy for children, its pedagogy and how these qualities can help resuscitate the concept of ubuntu in view of the current moral degeneration in our society. It is therefore imperative to first discuss the rationale for introducing philosophy, the nature and principles of the two concepts under discussion, thus, philosophy for children and ubuntu.

III. NATURE OF PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN

For many years, dating back from classical times, philosophy was considered to be the domain for adults. Plato clearly showed his intention to restrict the accessibility of philosophy to youngsters when he maintained that the dialectic was a double edged sword that could prove to be subversive if used by a person who lacked the necessary rationality and maturity (Daniel and Auriac, 2009). This assertion even got more support following Piaget’s theory of cognitive development with some philosophers maintaining that youngsters are not capable of thinking critically and reflectively. Some arguments against engaging children in philosophy were based on the premise that there are certain conditions needed for one to study this discipline. These are the learners’ knowledge and maturity as well as his intrinsic motivation to comprehend philosophical texts. Such motivation, it was argued, is rather absent in children (Murriss, 2000).

As this discipline was considered unfit for children, it is no wonder why it seems to be exclusively offered to students in colleges and universities (Kennedy, 2000). In consideration of the notion that the essence of philosophy is critical thinking (Daniel and Auriac, 2009), Lipman (1988) getting the influence from Vygotsky (1985) sees critical thinking as the main element prevalent in children through verbal exchange among peers. Although some philosophers contest the introduction of philosophy for children in the classroom suggesting that the discussions by children it fosters are not philosophical, Socrates argues that through questioning, critical thinking is enhanced and children discover knowledge. For Socrates, knowledge is not a preserve for adults, but would rather be discovered by the learner himself. Knowledge is considered a never achieved awareness that is constructed and reconstructed in and by the questioning (Murriss, 2000). As Lipman et. al, (1980) view it, this complex philosophical thinking needs to be nurtured in children as it is neither innate nor magic. We consider Daniel and Auriac's (2009) sentiments that it is not because one enters adulthood that one automatically becomes a critical thinker. In the same vein Mathews (1994:18) says maturity brings staleness and uninventiveness to the exploitation of philosophical ideas while children are often "fresh and inventive thinkers". In most cases adults' perceptions maybe taken differently by children, so childhood can be said to be the best time to capture children's philosophical aptitudes.

An American philosopher, Mathew Lipman, proposed a philosophy for children programme in the 1970s (Kennedy 2000; Daniel and Auriac, 2009), and to date the programme has been implemented in fifty countries, its material has been translated into twenty languages (Daniel and Auriac, 2009). This is being done in the light of the need to develop critical thinking in children through philosophical dialogue which evolves in a perspective to enrich group perspective as opposed to argumentation for individual ends (Lipman, 2003). In reference to the good qualities of Philosophy for children, Accorinti (2000) saw it as an education proposal that makes it possible for teenagers to develop complex thinking and therefore their reasoning abilities, critical, caring and creative thinking.

There are defined procedures to be followed in philosophy for children. In most cases children begin by reading texts in form of stories. These stories might be fictional but related to children's experiences. These stories should have themes which enable children to reason more effectively and show how they can apply their reasoning to life situations. The stories which should be used in a classroom setting should have many themes touching on children's experiences. Children will use the democratic processes to choose the themes to discuss. All members (children) are treated as equals in the dialogical process. Alternatively, children may come up with questions concerning ambiguous or paradoxical situations that intrigue them for discussion. Philosophy for children can be fostered through the holding of a dialogue in a group to construct elements of response to their questions so as to fulfil their common objectives. This can be done in a community of inquiry setting. The community has the guiding principles to be followed by all members. A brief reference to the nature and principles of the community of inquiry is essential.

IV. THE COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY

The term community of inquiry was first used by Charles Saunders Pierce to refer to the interaction among scientists (Ndofirepi, 2011). The tradition of community of inquiry also found its roots from Socratic philosophy as it values dialogue to solve problems and find possibilities and limitations to different situations (Retyunskikh, 2003). This community entails a micro-society in which children are initiated into the ethics of social life. The community offers democratic settings in which children are free to air their views on any subject under discussion in a classroom set up. The relationship among the community members is horizontal (members have equal power in dialogue) as opposed to a vertical setting (where others have more power). The class sits in a circular formation and they read a story, sentence by sentence. After completing reading the story, children suggest questions to discuss. These questions come from the themes in the story or from paradoxes and ambiguities emerging from the text. The role of the teacher is to facilitate critical dialogue within the community of inquiry. It is the way the teacher guides community members which makes the discussions more philosophical as opposed to mere conversations (Accorinti, 2000). When children are used to this exercise, they develop to be critical thinkers thereby fulfilling the main purpose of the discipline. A spirit of tolerance is fostered through a communal setting which also instils empathy in community members. The fact that the community members are pursuing the common objectives, the spirit of oneness is instilled, cutting across individual and cultural differences. As children get used to this learning situation, their extrinsic motivation is gradually transformed into intrinsic motivation to act voluntarily in order to solve the common problem by means of dialogue (Daniel, et.al, 2000).

It must be noted that the social qualities obtained through the community of inquiry are extended beyond the particular micro-community into the larger community. This is in line with Splitter and Sharp's (1995) view that classroom community of inquiry expanding outwards and make connections with other communities thereby enabling participants to be exposed to different others and develop a broader world view thereby influencing other communities to become more like the democratic community of the philosophy for children classroom. In order to come up with a more critical quality discussion, philosophy for children advocates the exposure of children to various aspects of reasoning skills so that they will be able to draw a line between critical and non-critical reasoning, identify ambiguities and fallacies in the thought process. This can be done through designing banks of exercises to illustrate the aspects like assumptive reasoning, critical and non-critical thought, fallacies, precision, and consistency among other aspects.

This philosophy will see children growing to be critical thinkers who tolerate diverse cultures. This is very essential as all societies have developed to be multicultural. In their diversity, the communal ethic will be maintained and children will be pursuing the same objectives. Developing this communal ethic, tolerance and a democratic spirit is likely to see the societies producing morally upright citizens who consider other citizens before engaging into certain behaviours.

V. THE NATURE OF UNHU/UBUNTU

African philosophy is centred on the concept of unhu or ubuntu. Literally translated unhu/ubuntu means humanness. Ubuntu is a complex concept that underlies the complexity of humanness itself. Chitumba (2013) takes ubuntu to be complex, elusive and multifaceted. It necessarily has to be; for it describes the very essence of Africanness. It describes human existence not only in spatio-temporary terms but also in thought and experience as lived in the community. The concept of unhu/ubuntu is embedded in African tradition. It is therefore an expression of all that constitutes the African way of life.

The African way of life is one that is communitarian. It is one in which the individual is not solitary. The individual defines his or her existence with reference to others, his or her relationship with them (Samkange and Samkange, 1980). The relationship that an individual has with others is taken to be very significant in the life set up of the African people. This is clearly captured by the aphorism 'umuntu ngubantu ngabantu' that is "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore, I am" (Louw, 2010). According to Ramose (1999) to be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on this basis, establish respectful relations with them. In other words my human-ness is constituted by the human-ness of others, and vice versa. And the relations between human beings, other persons and me, are characterized by mutual recognition and respect (Kimmerk, 2011). The relationship between the individual and these others is one of interdependence; he or she depends on others and they depend on him or her.

Ubuntu is a bundle of cherished values in African societies. It articulates values such as respect for human beings, human dignity, and compassion, hard work leading to achievement, honesty, tolerance, generosity, kindness, gentleness, humility, and love (Mayer, 1980; Chitumba, 2011). These bind the community together. In the African communitarian way of life the success of the individual is shared among all he or she relates with. Similarly the misfortune of the individual is the misfortune of many through relational ties. Thus sharing is not only sharing the good things of life. This is exactly what Jordan Kush Ngubane (1963: 76) means when he says

Supreme virtue lay in being humane, in accepting the human being as part of yourself, with a right to be denied nothing that you possessed. It was inhuman to drive the hungry stranger from your door, for your neighbour's sorrow was yours. This code constituted a philosophy of life, and the great Sutu- nguni family...called it, significantly, ubuntu or botho... the practice of being humane.

This is further reinforced by the other aphorism: 'If when faced with a decisive choice between wealth and the preservation of the life of another human being, then one should opt for the preservation of life' (Kimmerk, 2011). Ubuntu can therefore be taken to refer to humanness; it is an African philosophy emphasizing African ethics and practical morality and, as Kimmerk (2011) says, this is a basic principle of social philosophy.

VI. PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN: A MODEL FOR UNHU/UBUNTU

The morality of community members is mainly the product of social experience stemming from childhood. It is believed that children develop some social dispositions in many aspects of life through interaction with their community in general and their peers in particular (Vygotsky, 1985). Societies which emphasise individualism through its structures normally produce societal members who are egoistic and have no feeling for their fellow community members. On the contrary, products of a community which is bound by communal ethic are likely to be communal in their living. The communities of this nature are characterised by empathy and tolerance of people of diverse cultural, social and economic backgrounds (Peresuh and Nhundu 1999; Bodunrin 1991; Fafunwa and Aisiku, 1982).

These social qualities which have the potential to strengthen the moral fabric of the community, it can be argued, can be moulded through learning paradigms and pedagogies if well exploited in the classroom setting. As alluded to above, introducing children to philosophy through the philosophy for children programme advocated by Lipman (2003) entails fostering a communitarian way of life. Through the community of inquiry, the spirit of treating everything in terms of the common good is instilled, a collective conscience is nurtured. This cultivates the feeling of empathy and the spirit of tolerance among group members. These desirable social aspects are expected to go beyond the immediate classroom into the larger community (Accorint, 2000; Splitter and Sharp 1995).

Naturally, children find comfort in groups of peers (Ndofirepi, 2011). During preschool period, children learn different ways of conduct. Some form of discipline and some corrective measures are evident in communities of peers. Children have a tendency of learning some forms of behaviours from their peers which they may not necessarily learn from adults. These disposition children have before school must be taken as strong foundations for moral development at school. A school as a community with children of different learning levels and diverse social and economic backgrounds must be taken as the best place to give children an opportunity to express themselves in a democratic environment through the philosophy for children approach (Lipman, 2003; Kennedy, 2000).

One of the most important aspect of philosophy is critical thinking (Daniel and Auriac, 2009). Sutcliffe (2003) asserts that the community of inquiry recognises the classroom as a community in which thinking that is critical, creative, caring and collaboration is promoted. In his argument on the relationship between critical thinking and communal ethic, Ndofirepi (2011) concludes that a person cannot be truly critical if he does not care about what and whom he is being critical of. The community of inquiry is made more effective by the sharpening of children's reasoning aptitudes. This is done through exposing them to exercises that foster critical thinking, precision and consistency (Kennedy 2000). With these skills the dialogues within the community of inquiry becomes more philosophical as opposed to mere conversations (Daniel and Auric, 2009). Philosophy for children socialises children for a communal social ethic desirable for contemporary societies. Cultural pluralism has become a global phenomena and some communal living in any society is inevitable. Differences in culture, religion, levels of thinking and

maturity and general social and economic backgrounds can be divisive factors. Philosophy for children can therefore play an important role in bringing social harmony through the elements of tolerance, critical thinking and democratic dispositions it fosters.

Taking into cognisance that the African concept, ubuntu, was the main basis for the sustenance of the African moral fabric, lines of similarities can be easily drawn between ubuntu and philosophy for children. This can be done upon the realisation that the communal ethic in philosophy for children is greatly entrenched in the African group philosophy (ubuntu). We therefore argue that the implementation of philosophy for children approach in schools will help resuscitate the essentials of ubuntu philosophy whose decline is characterised by moral decay in our communities.

The main aim of education in African traditional societies was the transmission of cultural heritage from one generation to the next (Peresuh and Nhundu, 1999; Fafunwa and Aisiku 1976; Taberondwa, 1998). This includes the maintenance of moral values cherished by the society. The production of morally upright members who had a feeling for their fellow community members was the ultimate goal of education (Ramose, 1999). This entails the nurturing of individuals who depended on other individuals for survival, individuals who go by the community morality, thus people with ubuntu or personhood.

Beginning from early childhood, in African traditional societies, children were identified by their extended families and in turn their immediate communities. Every activity was done communally (Gyeke, 1997; Peresuh and Nhundu, 1999), any individualism was frowned at. All elders bore the responsibility of nurturing desired moral values in children. This communal ethic was fostered in these elders by the preceding generations. The end result was the desired product, a person with ubuntu or personhood (Chitumba, 2011). Because of this African nurturing, moral degeneration, as it is today, was not known.

Although ubuntu led to the sustenance of traditional societies, one cannot necessarily advocate a return to an African past in its entirety (Makuvaza, 1996). This is because community structures have changed, communities are no longer unicultural in nature. It can however be argued that the essentials of ubuntu can be retained through exploitation of modern approaches like philosophy for children. We must consider the view by the critics of traditional education in Africa that point to the fact that the system failed to promote critical thinking (Ndofirepi, 2011). Education, it is argued, was characterised by the presence of unquestioned obedience to authority. The shortfalls of African traditional education can well be addressed through the use of modern approaches at the same time paying attention to the essentials of African morality. Higgs (2003) believes that Africa can use philosophy in a particular sense to address social issues, philosophy is expected to be pragmatic and render a service to society, in this case, the moral degeneration which has become a major ill in our society must get a remedy through philosophy. Ndofirepi (2011) calls for situating philosophy for children within the African milieu. This is expected to resuscitate the African moral values relevant for the 21st century.

Traditional African education being authoritarian, a democratic flavour is essential for the discourse to be relevant in

the 21st century. Wayhid (2004) has the same view as he advocates for a new philosophy of education for Africa that emphasises achieving reasonableness whereby children are regarded as reasonable people who are more open to interpreting, analysing and looking beyond texts. A democratic setting espoused by the community of inquiry suitably places African moral development in the 21st century.

As texts, stories, paradoxes and ambiguities are used in the community of inquiry, African moral development can be easily enhanced through the inclusion of African themes through the medium used in traditional societies. Gyekye (1997) stresses that stories and proverbs are primary ways through which a great deal of African philosophical thought, knowledge, has been taught. Through philosophy for children, children are exposed to do philosophy at an early age by reflecting on, analysing and interpreting their traditional beliefs, customs, habits and histories (Gyekye 1997). Their languages must also be used as a medium of analysis (Fasiku, 2008). Basing on the strength of communal moral teaching, philosophy for children can be used to resuscitate ubuntu. As children spend most of their time at school, it can be argued that employing philosophy for children taking into cognisance African moral values will resuscitate ubuntu. As the setting promotes tolerance of children from a diverse social and economic backgrounds, children become empathetic and generally morally upright.

A continual exploitation of the philosophy for children approach will lead to the appreciation of the group ethic by learners thereby promoting the philosophy of ubuntu with a democratic flavour (Ndofirepi, 2011). These learning experiences are likely to nurture children into morally upright citizens because they will be endeavouring to meet the community values arrived at through critical thinking. As philosophy for children has the potential qualities to develop morally upright members for a multicultural society, this is the situatedness of ubuntu in the 21st century.

VII. CONCLUSION

Against the background of moral degeneration in our community philosophy for children if properly implemented in schools may help resuscitate morality. The emphasis put on communal learning in philosophy for children appeals well to African moral teaching (ubuntu). Contemporary plural societies are well accommodated as the approach fosters tolerance in the learners. Although it can be argued that capturing ubuntu in its natural state is an illusion, essential principles which are in tune with the 21st century can be realised. As the major elements of philosophy for children are compatible with the philosophy for children approach, the moral foundation from the home will be supported through this teaching approach. A democratic flavour of philosophy for children will make societies realise the essentials of ubuntu in tandem with contemporary times.

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