Pedagogy of Sagacity: An African Approach to Philosophy of Education

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Abstract

Philosophy of education is a compulsory course in teacher education in Africa. African scholars have observed that this course is predominantly approached from Western pedagogical perspective hence alienating African students of education. There is lack of African pedagogy responsive to the African context of education as noted by a national commission on education in Kenya. This calls for a search for African pedagogy to instigate paradigm shift from Western pedagogy to Afrocentric pedagogy. Sage Philosophy, a trend in African Philosophy is analyzed in this study in attempt to develop African pedagogy. The method used is philosophical argument based on critical conceptual analysis. The study findings result in an African pedagogy described as 'pedagogy of sagacity' which is proposed as an African approach to philosophy of education. The thesis of this essay is that trends in African philosophy should influence pedagogical theorizing of education in Africa.

Key notes: Sage philosophy, Pedagogy, African philosophy, Philosophy of education

Introduction

Philosophy of education is a compulsory course in teacher education in Africa. African scholars have observed that this course is predominantly approached from Western pedagogical perspective hence alienating African students of education. There is lack of African pedagogy responsive to the African context of education as noted by Bennaars (1998) and Koech (1999) commission on education in Kenya. This calls for a search for African pedagogy to instigate paradigm shift from Western pedagogy to Afrocentric pedagogy. The essay first describes the problem of dominance of Western philosophy and pedagogy in Africa as basis of search for African pedagogy, then an analysis and assessment of the model proposed by Njoroge and Bennaars (1986) is undertaken to examine its appropriateness for developing African pedagogy. Sage philosophy, a trend in African philosophy is described and its pedagogical principles are deduced by method of critical conceptual analysis. The result from this analysis is an African pedagogy described as 'pedagogy of sagacity.' The thesis of this essay is that trends in African philosophy should influence pedagogical theorizing in Africa.

Objectives

The general objective of this study is to find an African pedagogy to overcome predominance of Western pedagogy in Africa.

The specific objective of this study is to develop African pedagogy from Sage philosophy.

Method

The study employed philosophical method of argument and critical conceptual analysis to analyze Sage philosophy in terms of its African pedagogical implications. The model proposed by Njoroge and Bennaars (1986) as a means to develop African philosophy is adopted. This model itself is subjected to critical review which reveals some weaknesses in spite of its usefulness.

Dominance of Western Philosophy and its Pedagogy in Africa

According to Nyasani (2010) there is ‘a modern argument’ that ‘African development is not possible unless it borrows and relies heavily’ on ‘the Western model of general development’ (pp. 2, 3). This view is reflected in education where Anglophone Africa has heavily borrowed from Anglo-American philosophies of education (Okrah, 2003). Students of education in Africa are introduced to smorgasbord of Western philosophical systems including *idealism*, *realism*, *naturalism*, *progressivism*, *pragmatism*, *perennialism*,

essentialism, behaviorism, postmodernism, feminism, amongst other *isms*. These systems of philosophy are often taught without pedagogical contextualization in African experience. Students receive them as petrified essences or fossilized inert ideas (Whitehead, 2008, p. 2). In addition reference materials and bibliographies are largely based on American and British educational resources. This led Njoroge and Bennaars (1986) to observe that ‘judging by textbooks on Educational Philosophy, there is no such thing as the African Philosophy of Education’ (p.59). Consequently Koech (1999) commission challenged Kenyan scholars to revisit African ‘historical and philosophical roots with a new vision’ of developing an African philosophy ‘to guide both the content and methods of the entire Kenyan curriculum design and practice’ (par., 1.3.5). This is reminiscent of Du Bois (1973) who argues that African historicity and culture should form the basis of African philosophy of education.

The situation is no different in Post-Apartheid South Africa where ‘often western curricula, labels and methods, which are unfit for the majority of South African children, are still being used in schools’ (Venter, 2004, p. 155), (Waghid, 2008). This Western pedagogy alienates African learners from local experience. This is akin to what Paulo Freire (1972) ‘the inaugural philosopher of critical pedagogy’ (Groenke, 2009, p. 3) referred to as “banking concept of education’ characterized as ‘suffering from narration sickness’ (p.64). Freire (1972)

illustrates an alienating pedagogy as follows:

The teacher ... expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students. His task is to “fill” the students with the contents of his narration - contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. Words are emptied of their concreteness and become a hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity. (p. 57).

In this situation students are spectators-learners rather than critical inquirers (Dewey 1916) they are analogous to the condition of education of prisoners depicted by Plato in his allegory of the cave. Guy is critical of ‘the British tradition of education (which) brought Africans...into the company of the Western-educated world. It gave them the new horizons...for direct entry into Western institutions.... But it took them very little of the way to their next task ... of reforming radically’ (1963, p.8). Okrah (2003) laments that: ‘It is appalling that, there has not been found the need to address the issue of the content of the curriculum in African schools in tune with African philosophies’ (p. 18). However, Waghid (2008) has explored implications of African(a) philosophy of education for university teachers. He argues that ‘university teaching ought to be framed within an African(a) philosophy of

education' thereby 'responding to the needs and circumstances of African students (learners) (p. 34).

Venter (2004) advocates for a 'more definite African philosophy of education which is more relevant and meaningful to African students of education is needed' (p.156). Such a philosophy should 'reconstruct African culture to fit and facilitate modern learning in an African setting' (Venter, 2004, p.156). Venter views African philosophy of education along its pedagogical relevance in African context. Merry and William (2008) point out that 'African-centered pedagogy aims to cultivate a positive and productive culturally based identity for Black children, and African-centered schools endeavor to supply that cultural base, placing the history, culture, and life experiences of individuals of African descent at the center of everything that they do' (p.35).

Pedagogy: Broad and Narrow Meaning

The concept of pedagogy has restricted and broad meaning. In the former sense pedagogy is reduced to mere methods of instruction understood within limits of educational empirical sciences such as educational psychology but in the latter meaning pedagogy is 'a philosophical-normative' term "we refer to pedagogy in the broader sense of the word, which ... includes both instruction and social vision" (1998;3). It is a theoretical guide of education based on a normative social vision on

what education ought to be. This essay is about African pedagogy as a social vision, a guide to education responsive or relevant to African situation. African pedagogy must rise from critical reflection on African experience and not from foreign or Western philosophies. According to Okrah (2003) 'we must seek an African view to the problems of Africa. However, this does not mean that Western techniques and methods are not applicable to Africa'(p.18). What is required is an African perspective which 'affirms how both general and particular messages of education would be conveyed to learners, who will use such information for their livelihoods' (Abdi, 2012, p. 83). Borrowing from Tejeda and Espinoza we argue that African pedagogy has to address 'both the means and the end of schooling' (p. 6). It must challenge 'forms, content, and intent of other pedagogies and their antecedent, but also require a complete reconceptualization of learning in classroom' (p. 8). Waghid (2008) argued that university teaching ought to be framed within an African(a) philosophy of education' and deliberative inquiry thereby making university teachers to be *learning mediators* (p. 42). Abdi (2012) called for decolonizing philosophies of education which revalue indigenous knowledge and contributes to non-alienating schemes of learning (p. 5). African pedagogy has to be both a social vision of education carried out by deliberative inquiry predicated upon African experience and situations.

Analysis of Models for African Pedagogy

Njoroge and Bennaars (1986) worked out a model for African approach to philosophy of education ‘a MODEL that brings out the specific features of a truly African Philosophy of Education’ (p. 88). This model postulates twofold criteria or conditions for an African approach to philosophy of education namely *technical* and *African*. Thus like Waghid (2008), Njoroge and Bennaars (1986) locate African pedagogy on African philosophy. Technical methods of philosophy are critical, rational, phenomenological and speculative (pp. 23-24). With regard to the second criterion philosophy is *African* if ‘it reflects the trends characteristic of philosophical thinking in Africa’ (p. 89). The four trends in African philosophy are ethno-philosophy, cultural philosophy, political philosophy and formal philosophy. Njoroge and Bennaars (1986) in their set of trends in African philosophy failed to acknowledge Orika’s ‘four trends in current African philosophy’ (Ochieng, 1995, p. 95). On his part Orika (1990) identified four trends in African philosophy but also failed to acknowledge the four trends identified by Njoroge and Bennaars (1986). There seem to be an ‘External Dialogue Problem (EDP)’ between Kenyan philosophers and Kenyan philosophers of education. EDP refers to ‘lack of stable reciprocal exchange of ideas between those within a field of study and those in another but related discipline’ (Stanford, 2013). This essay hopes to overcome

EDP between African philosophy and African philosophy of education by use of Sage Philosophy to develop African pedagogy.

In writing on African pedagogy Bennaars (1998) stated that 'in view of current theorizing about educational practice in Africa, we must seek to reconstruct an African pedagogy that is *responsive* to the African condition' (pp. 2-3). In spite of this, Bennaars (1998) fails to use the four trends of African philosophy in his 'search for an African pedagogy' (p. 30). Koech commission (1999) required that: 'To understand and accept ourselves as Kenyans demand that we revisit our historical and philosophical roots with a new vision' (paragraph 1.3.5) which is African and not foreign. Only then can we remedy 'lack of a well-defined vision and ... apparent lack of direction in educational theorizing in Africa' (Bennaars, 1998, p. 3). We need 'a normative stance or a social vision of teaching' which Bennaars explains as 'theoretical vision *to* guide one's critical reading of the world and of the educational situation. The same vision proposes guidelines for educational practice and for an appropriate methodology' (1998, p. 2). This is similar to the view expressed by Koech (1999) Commission which stated that

As the nation enters the new millennium, it is imperative that a coherent Afrocentric philosophy of education be formulated to guide both the content and methods of the

entire curriculum design and practice. Time has now come for us to define ourselves in our own Kenyan way. To understand and accept ourselves as Kenyans demand that we revisit our historical and philosophical roots with a new vision. (paragraph 1.3.5).

Thus the search for African pedagogy denotes the broader meaning of pedagogy which guides both content and methods of curricular design and practice. It 'will not be merely concerned with pedagogic measures or pedagogic skills, but will also carry a *vision of teaching* that is both liberating and empowering' (1998, p. 8). Liberative role of African pedagogy is based on Afrocentric roots of African history and philosophy.

In adopting the model by Njoroge and Bennaars (1986) for an African approach to philosophy of education we shall use a trend in African philosophy namely Sage Philosophy to work out an African pedagogy. Since Sage philosophy is a trend in African philosophy we guided by Dewey in bringing Sage philosophy to bear upon education in Africa. According to Dewey (1916, p. 331) philosophy is 'general theory of education.' He explains that "education is a touchstone...of all philosophy. If we were always to apply the touchstone of education to our academic philosophy, the latter would gain much in vital force; it would yield better

fruit and it would be better adapted to the mind of the student” (p. 328). In quoting G. Stanley Hall, Hovre (1930) asserts that true philosophy is philosophy of education i.e.: “The only true, ripe, or finished philosophy...is that of education’ (p. xxxii). Both Dewey and Hall are instructive in this essay in that Sage Philosophy a trend in African Philosophy could be better utilized when analyzed in context of education in Africa. Sage Philosophy has possibility of ripening into finished philosophy when analyzed in terms of African pedagogy. As earlier observed this will remedy lack of EDP between African philosophy and African philosophy of education.

Sage Philosophy: Its Objective

Research on Sage Philosophy was meant to debunk ‘the well-known claim that real philosophical thought had no place in traditional Africa’ (Oruka 1991, 34). Odhiambo (1995) elaborates that:

The objective of this research was to identify individuals of traditional Kenya who are wise in the philosophic didactic sense, and thereafter write their thoughts on paper, as proof of the existence of genuine African philosophy in the proper and technical sense of the word. Today the product of this research project is termed ‘Philosophic

Sagacity” and is one of the approaches to the debate on African philosophy. (p. 81).

This was the European conventional view on African mentality which is well documented and illustrated by Odhiambo (1995). From pedagogical perspective this Western prejudice against African rationality is evident in Mullin (1965) who in an effort “to lay down guide-lines for the ... Christian apostolate in modern Africa” (p. 3) declared that:

The African’s reasoning methods are not discursive; he knows nothing of the syllogism, he thinks inductively rather than deductively; nor is his thinking analytic: it is intuitive and synthetic This is a mentality different from the European, and to be respected as such One consequence of it is a circular manner of thinking, a collecting of impressions, a feeling of the way before coming to the kernel of a problem A more important consequence is the primacy in his thought of the concrete over the abstract; and the human over the institutional European teachers, trained in deductive thought, pass on ideas in a way impossible for the African to assimilate. They do not square with his reasoning. (p. 3).

It is on basis of this Western prejudice that Western philosophy became dominant in Africa. This claim implies that “existence of philosophy in modern Africa is due wholly to the introduction of western thought to Africa” (Oruka, p. 41), (Wainaina, 2006). Oruka undertook his research on

Sage Philosophy in the hope that if ‘sages of the second order type were found in traditional Africa...then this fact should amount to a proof for the invalidity of the claim in question’ (p. 34). The findings of the Sage research is as follows (1991, p.34)

Findings in Kenya show that there are two main divisions of sage philosophy. One is that of the sage whose thought, though well informed and educative, fails to go beyond the celebrated folk-wisdom. Such a sage may not have the ability or inclination to apply his own independent critical objection to folk beliefs. He is, therefore, a folk sage in contrast to the second type of the sage, the philosophic sage. The former is a master of popular wisdom while the latter is an expert in didactic wisdom.

The philosophic sage may know, as the folk sage does, what the cardinal beliefs and wisdoms of his community are, but he makes an independent, critical assessment to what the people take for granted. Thus, while the sagacity of the folk sage remains at the first order level of philosophy, that of the philosophic sage is a second-order philosophy, that is a reflection on and a rationalized evaluation of what is given in the first order. What is given in the first order is a mixture of conventional-cum-customary beliefs and practices.

Armed with evidence of existence of philosophic

sages in Africa, Sage Philosophy succeeded in debunking Western prejudice against existence of philosophical thought in Africa. As Oruka stated, Sage philosophy ‘demonstrates the fact that traditional Africa had...critical personalized philosophical discourse’ (p. 43). However, scholars interested in Sage Philosophy are concerned about its future. Gail Presby suggests as follows

I suggest that the original impetus for starting the sage philosophy project - the defense against Euro-American skeptics who thought Africans incapable of philosophizing - has been outgrown. The present need for studies of African sages is to benefit from their wisdom, both in Africa and around the world. I also suggest that the title ‘sage’ has to be problematized. While there were good reasons to focus earlier on rural elders as overlooked wise philosophers, the emphasis now should be on admiring philosophical thought wherever it may be found—in women, youth, and urban Africans as well. In such a way, philosophy will be further relevant to people’s lives, and further light will be shed and shared regarding the lived experience in Africa.

This essay goes beyond the debate on African philosophy in attempt to tease out pedagogical principles in Sage Philosophy. We build on success of Sage Philosophy

in shifting from Western to African pedagogy. This essay interrogates Sage Philosophy in terms of its pedagogical potential for education in Africa.

Pedagogical Analysis of Sage Philosophy: Results and Discussions

This study hopes to make findings which will show that African pedagogy will enable students to think critically and creatively in solving African problems. The study hopes to show how Sage philosophy can shift pedagogy from Western domination to African context. Dewey (1916) in his magnum opus, *Democracy and Education* asserts that

“Philosophy of education” is not an external application of ready-made ideas to a system of practice having a radically different origin and purpose: it is only an explicit formulation of the problems of the formation of right mental and moral habitudes in respect to the difficulties of contemporary social life. The most penetrating definition of philosophy which can be given is, then, that it is the theory of education in its most general phases. (p. 331).

We can borrow from Dewey the idea that pedagogy in Africa must not be external application of foreign

philosophies but rather it must develop from African experience. African pedagogy should relate to “the problems of the formation of right mental and moral habitudes in respect to the difficulties of contemporary social life” in Africa (Dewey, 1916, p. 328). This is because ‘pedagogy from the start has always been strongly associated with the social and moral upbringing...as the education of youth ... in the full realization of human abilities’ (Bennaars, 1998, p. 4). But with the success of Sage Philosophy why should an external ‘system of practice’ continue to dominate pedagogy in Africa? Riding on the back of success of Sage Philosophy we can answer that: African pedagogy cannot be external application of ready-made alien ideas. Since the aim of Oruka was “to look for philosophy or traces of philosophy in traditional Africa” (1991, p. 41). This essay attempts an explicit formulation of African pedagogy from Sage philosophy. Sage philosophy has proven that based on thoughts of African sages there is philosophizing in African culture. According to Erny (1981) there is ‘an extremely intimate connection between a given pedagogy and the type of society to which it corresponds’ (p. 7). We need an African pedagogy corresponding to sagacity of modern African society.

Pedagogy of Sagacity

According to Njoroge and Bennaars (1986) two conditions are required for African approach to philosophy

of education namely African Philosophy and Technical method of philosophy. These conditions are adopted to work out African pedagogy from Sage philosophy. The aim is to bring out pedagogical implications of Sage Philosophy, a trend in African philosophy. The method used is critical conceptual analysis of the two kind of sages in Sage philosophy. There are two kinds of sages in Sage philosophy, the folk and the philosophic sage. The two represent two levels of thinking in African culture. Folk sage practices first order thinking while philosophic sage is second order thinking. What pedagogical inferences can be derived from these two levels of sagacity? Conceptual analysis of these two levels of sagacity from pedagogical perspective will result in pedagogy of sagacity. Pedagogy of sagacity will have two levels namely first order of pedagogy of folk sagacity and second order pedagogy of philosophic sagacity.

Conceptual analysis of folk sagacity leads to Pedagogy of folk sagacity. It is practice of education where the main focus is transmission of established bodies of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes. The tendency is to conserve and disseminate stock of knowledge as available in textbooks. Folk pedagogy preserves practices and beliefs in education as conventional wisdom for maintenance of status quo. It takes comfort in the traditional view which is polemically defended as the familiar and normal or customary practice. Folk pedagogy is responsible for the

continued dominance of Western approaches to philosophy of education in Africa. Educators schooled in Western education when teaching in Africa require that Western practices be imposed in Africa. It propagates assumption that Western tradition is the only way that Africa should imitate for its education.

Pedagogical analysis of the concept of philosophic sage leads to Pedagogy of philosophic sagacity. It implies pedagogical practice which is of second order activity of teaching and learning. It is critical of first order thinking and practice of education. It is critically reflective of prevalent practice of education. It abhors uncritical acceptance of conventional practices in education. It advocates for interrogation of educational assumptions and beliefs for their relevance in African situation. Pedagogy of philosophic sagacity views education within a broad perspective of what is taught, how it is taught and why it is taught. This perspective makes educators to become reflective practitioners or what Waghid called learning mediators.

Summary

This essay is philosophical analysis of Sage Philosophy to develop an African pedagogy. The aim of the essay was to propose an African pedagogy as alternative to the dominance of western pedagogy in Africa. Example was cited from philosophy of education which heavily

relies on Western philosophies of education. This alienates African students of education from philosophizing about education in African context. The model of developing African approach to philosophy of education by Njoroge and Bennaars is appropriated here to work out an African pedagogy. Based on the two levels of sagacity in Sage philosophy by conceptual analysis an African pedagogy described as pedagogy of sagacity is arrived at. Pedagogy of sagacity has two levels that of folk and philosophic pedagogy. The two levels of pedagogy can be instrumental in aiding African teachers to self-examine their assumptions in educational practice. This essay advocates for philosophic pedagogy for it is critical of established educational beliefs and practices.

Conclusion

In conclusion the model proposed by Njoroge and Bennaars (1986) is useful in developing African pedagogy. Such pedagogy is predicated upon Sage Philosophy which is a trend in African Philosophy, and philosophical method of critical conceptual analysis. Using the attributes of both folk sage and Philosophic sage pedagogical implications are deduced from both types of sages leading to pedagogy of sagacity. The predominant reliance on Western approach to philosophy of education in Kenya can now be mitigated by African pedagogy based on African philosophic sagacity.

This is a paradigm shift towards pedagogy of philosophic sagacity which is critical and reflective based on situation-specific to African experience. It seeks to ground approach to education based on African conditions. Philosophic sagacity furnishes a productive conceptual framework for educational philosophizing for critical emancipation from alienating Western pedagogies. This is a proposal of one possible direction among others where pedagogy of sagacity can be relevant as a theory of social vision in philosophy of education in Africa, Kenya in particular.

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