

## Philosophy for Children: the quest for an African perspective

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*The debate as to whether philosophy is suitable for children is an ancient one and the discussion of philosophical issues has been withheld from the young since Plato's time. This paper seeks to examine the possibility of a Philosophy for Children programme in Africa. This presentation is a critical discourse on the concept of Philosophy for Children in the context of Africa through African-centred criteria. The paper attempts to recover aspects of the traditional African education and ways of philosophizing that may have been effective for earlier purposes but now need to be reconceptualised in new ways to serve today's purposes. This document discussion shows the need to hybridize traditional African ways of doing philosophy with children within the 21st century African milieu.*

**Keywords:** African perspective; children; philosophy for children; philosophy

### Introduction

Didactic teaching is a product-oriented approach, with output being measured in terms of achievement in examinations, and is characterized by the absence of independent thinking and the presence of unquestioned obedience to authority characterizes educational systems of most African countries. The literature is replete with depictions of how education in Africa was used by colonial governments to perpetuate rote learning and passive acceptance of facts, at the same time discouraging critical thinking, especially among indigenous children. Critique of colonial and post-colonial education in Africa as perpetuating cultural and intellectual servitude and devaluation of traditional African cultures has led some African intellectuals to demand a re-appropriation of pre-colonial forms of education to rediscover the roots of African identity (Kanu, 2007). On the other hand, critics of traditional education in Africa have drawn attention to the system's failure to promote critical thinking. Matthew Lipman, an American philosopher at Montclair State University College, and his followers have made significant contributions to educational theory and practice by showing how 'Philosophy for Children' can enhance children's moral, social and cognitive development. To that end, Lipman (in Fisher, 1990) concluded that if we want children to become reflective adults we must make them reflective children.

Discourses about educational renewal in post independent Africa have recently rekindled the argument among African intellectuals that for education to be meaningful in Africa today, it must be based in the wisdom, teachings and traditions of the continent's ancestors, particularly in light of the irrelevance of colonial education to the lives of Africans (Tedla, 2006). It is against this background that this discussion aims at situating Philosophy for Children in the African context by placing the African child and his/her traditional cultural and philosophical condition in the arena of philosophy at an early age. The pertinent question then is: how can traditional forms of philosophizing be re-appropriated while at the same time responding to the requirements of living successfully in post-colonial and global times in Africa?

### **A brief history of Philosophy for Children**

With the escalation of the Vietnam War in the mid 1960s, there were arguments about the morality and wisdom of the war and society's ills in general. The pertinent question then was: if education is supposed to be about teaching young people to think, why does the system produce so many unthinking people? Matthew Lipman became dismayed by the level and quality of argumentation presented by educated American citizens. He therefore proposed a course in philosophy to 'teach children to think, because such a course would develop reasoning skills; (and) also a means of raising self-esteem and developing moral values' (Fisher, 1998:27). Lipman tried to figure a way to do this that would stimulate the interests of 10–11 year olds because ... thus he launched a children's novel. *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*. During the 1970s, the demand for teaching critical thinking skills in schools became more prominent and it has continued largely ignored to the present. In response to this deficit of thinking skills in American education, Lipman launched the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) at Montclair State University. As a mirror of the rapidly expanding international impact of the Philosophy for Children project, educators from around the globe instituted the International Council for Philosophical Inquiry with Children (ICPIC) in 1985. At present, Philosophy for Children projects can be found in colleges, universities and associations in more than 50 countries around the world.

### **The concept of Philosophy for Children**

Most philosophers have struggled, but failed, to give a definition of philosophy everyone agrees with (Murrin, 2000); as there are no necessary and sufficient conditions which can be formulated for calling something 'philosophy'. However, it is commonly agreed that philosophy begins from a sense of wonder and is wondering about the big questions of life and that the universe itself provides the first source of wonder. For purposes of this discussion, the following characteristics, as given by Kitchener (1990), will be taken to serve as indicators of 'doing philosophy':

- Thinking about a philosophical issue
- raising philosophical questions and being puzzled by things ordinarily taken for granted
- reading the great philosophers
- constructing arguments in support of certain kinds of conclusions
- engaging in various kinds of conversations about philosophy
- not being able to stop philosophizing (1990:425).

For Lipman (2003), inquiry is the investigative response to problematic aspects of human experience. Philosophical inquiry, to that end, through discussion and deliberation, will transform the problematic into the controversial, the participatory and ultimately the reasonable.

It may also be interesting to ask: what exactly falls under the concept 'child' or 'childhood'? For the purposes of this paper the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child defines a child as a person under the age of 18 (Das, 2004). Another important question may be raised: What is so peculiar about children that people are prompted to ask the question as to whether they can do philosophy in the first place? Matthews (1994) argues that maturity brings "staleness and "uninventiveness" to the exploration of philosophical ideas while children are often "fresh and inventive thinkers" (p.18). This implies that children's lack of knowledge of culture's convention might put them in an advantageous position to do philosophy at an early age. The world as-it-is is too often taken for granted by adults while children's think-

ing shows us another side of the world, that is how the world could have been and so childhood is the best time for learning

According to Accorinti (2000), Philosophy for Children, is an educational proposal that makes it possible for children and teenagers to develop complex thinking and therefore, their reasoning abilities, their critical thinking, their caring thinking and their creative thinking. In light of the aforementioned, Philosophy for Children can also be said to be a systematic and progressive programme, especially designed to be worked with children from the age of 4 to 18 years with the goal of developing and stimulating higher-order thinking. In the same vein, Lipman (2003) characterizes Philosophy for Children as an attempt to develop philosophy so that it may function as a form of education that is, an education that employs philosophy to engage the mind of the child in the search for meaning. Lipman (1988) uses the notion of a 'form of life' to highlight the distinction between 'philosophy' as a body of knowledge and 'philosophizing' as the activity of doing philosophy. He writes:

*The paradigm of doing philosophy is the towering, solitary figure of Socrates, for whom philosophy was neither an acquisition or a profession but a way of life. What Socrates models for us is not philosophy known or philosophy applied but philosophy practised. He challenges us to acknowledge that philosophy is a deed, as a form of life is something that any of us can emulate (Lipman, 1988:12).*

### **Why Philosophy for Children in Africa?**

With the colonial legacy, on the one hand, and the legacy of tradition, on the other, so deeply entrenched in African society, this means that transformation is one of the greatest challenges that education faces (Beets & Van Louw, 2005). The historical career of the philosophical enterprise — the role it has played in human affairs, in the development of human culture — is undoubtedly most amply manifested in the development of western cultures (Gyekye, 1997). In effect, postcolonial education in Africa has often been criticized as it "... redefines and reproduces hegemonic structures of western-defined knowledge" (Shizha, 2005:69). In the same vein, Matos (2000) locates the 'major disease' of education in Africa within "the systematic attempt to ignore and dismiss the intrinsic value of African culture, customs and practices" (p.18). It is with reference to this challenge that Meerkotter and Da Costa (1994) state that transformative education has no meaning if it merely denotes a redecoration of what is essentially west-centred education. In that regard, Waghid (2004) posits a new philosophy of education for Africa that emphasizes achieving reasonableness whereby children are regarded as reasonable people and who are more open to interpreting, analyzing and looking beyond texts. Situating Philosophy for Children within the African milieu serves the purpose of countering the hegemonic structures of the west that seek to imposed on the African continent through the use of western criteria in the form of its aims, methodologies and content. Thus, African ways of doing philosophy with its youth, that are traditional to the African past, needs to be re-appropriated in the 21st Century school curriculum. In addition, the African method could be exported to the west for possible implementation as an alternative philosophical framework and epistemology.

Philosophy for Children in Africa will involve a "great deal of African philosophical thought, knowledge and wisdom" (Gyekye, 1997:5; 24), since philosophical thinking process begins when people reflect upon and question their existence and its value (Nkennkia, 1999). In situating philosophy within the traditional African context, Higgs (2003:11) believes that: "(as) Africa wants to use philosophy in a particular sense to address social issues ... philosophy

is expected to be pragmatic and to render a 'service'." It is by so doing that introducing philosophy to children may become one of the transformative educational programmes through which Africa may be able "pull herself out of the maladies that face her" (Seepe, 2000:118) such as corruption, hunger and HIV and Aids. How philosophy (and similarly Philosophy for Children) "... can and should conceptually interpret African experience is no different from how this has been done for other societies and cultures" (Gyekye, 1997:24). To that end, it would be foolish indeed for Africans to ignore the wealth of experiences and meanings that have been nourished for generations and on which they can draw upon for insights that nourish them.

In his justification for doing philosophy with children, Lipman (1982) argues that to withhold philosophical ideas, procedures and reasoning skills from children is like withholding air from them and expecting them not to suffocate. In schools, Philosophy for Children, is not about teaching the views of particular philosophers like Socrates, Plato, Dewey, Wiredu, and others but rather about equipping children with the tools for thinking, engaging them in the search for meaning. On this view and with reference to Africa, Mkhabela and Luthuli (1997: 9, in Venter, 2002) explain that:

*[t]he biggest task that faces African philosophy of education is turning blacks from subjects into citizens. This is the process that will make them responsible as individuals; not only to their fellow learners, but also to their country.*

Thus, introducing philosophy to children at an early age could be one of the effective channels of transforming those (children) into reflective, responsible and progressive citizens.

One might further ask: should 'what is African?' be the starting point for such an exercise? Bodunrin (1991) argues that because philosophical problems arise out of real life situations and in Africa, traditional cultures and beliefs still exercise a great influence on the thinking and actions of men. However, by amalgamating western and African conceptions of philosophizing with children could aid the reconstruction of education. In a sense, the Philosophy for Children paradigm in Africa can,

*... creatively be forged from the furnace of the African cultural experience, an experience that is ... many-sided, having sprung from the encounters with alien cultures and religions and from problems internal to the practice of the indigenous ideas and values themselves* (Gyekye, 1997:280).

Fay (1987: 160) illustrates this further by asserting that:

*coming to be a person is in fact appropriating certain material of one's cultural tradition, and continuing to be a person means working through, developing and extending this material and this always involves operating in terms of [this tradition].*

Emanating from these quotes, it may be deduced that Philosophy for Children in Africa should draw its content and methodology from African beliefs and philosophies of life.

### **The community of inquiry paradigm**

The concept 'community of inquiry' was coined by Charles Saunders Peirce to refer to interaction among scientists. For Fisher (1996), the tradition of a community of inquiry, developed by Lipman and Sharp, and others, that was influenced by the philosophy of Socrates, John Dewey and C.S. Peirce. An inquiry, according to Sharp (in Naji, 2004), implies a self-corrective practice in which a subject matter is investigated with the aim of discovering or inventing ways of dealing with what is problematic. Thus, inquiry begins when the problems arise regarding issues and ideas, which are often taken for granted. Therefore, a 'community

of inquiry' can be described as a group of individuals who use dialogue to search out problems, limitations and possibilities of ideas (Retyunskikh, 2003). This is why Splitter and Sharp (1995:169) refer to children's initial opinions as "the raw ingredients" of inquiry, because "the goal of inquiry is to help children transform these ingredients into a more comprehensive worldview through reflective and self-correcting dialogue; that is through the activity of the 'community of inquiry'".

In the context of Philosophy for Children, the community of inquiry recognises the classroom as a community in which thinking that is critical, creative, caring and collaborative is promoted (Sutcliffe, 2003). Also in concurrence, Shizha (2006) confirms that "dialogue and collaboration are methods in the process of knowledge production" (2006:22) and a learner must become directly and actively involved or socially participate in a community of inquiry. The 'community of inquiry' concept of Philosophy for Children invites children to critically question the ideas around them; and to take each other as seriously as they wish to be taken; to forward new ideas of their own and to support each other in building common understanding. This makes the community of inquiry holistic in that each person's way of thinking is mutually dependant on others. For example, a person cannot be truly critical if she does not care about what and whom she is being critical. Most creative thinking emerges from some sort of dialogical, i.e. collaborative, activity. By use these children develop not just thinking skills (questioning, reasoning, supposing, evaluating, etc.) but also develop dispositions to think well. The community of inquiry provides children with the opportunity, skills and knowledge to transform their previously unreflective system of beliefs, ideas and habits into more reasoned, objective and justified thoughts; To that end, Philosophy for Children facilitates the development of autonomous, independent students who also recognize their interdependence and interconnectedness with others. Thus, implicit in the ideal workings of the community is the thinking that is caring; where each member being supported and allowed to be an integral member of the community, creative; new ideas are sought out and encouraged, and critical; good reasons are expected for one's ideas and positions.

The notion of community of inquiry can be further explained in the concept of community in African tradition. Tutu (1999:15, quoted in Beets and Van Louw, 2005) succinctly puts it:

*... harmony, friendliness are great goods, because Africans grow up in the community, in groups of village children, reach maturity within the cohort of peers, share the stages of initiation ...*

The Akan people of West Africa explain the above in the form of a proverb that "when a person descends from heaven, he descends into a human society" to underline the sociality of the Africans in that the person has a natural proclivity to join with or relate to other persons, and to participate in the life formed together from such a relationship. In sum, the community of inquiry theory considers the community as a fundamental human good, and advocates life is lived in harmony and in cooperation with others. Such communitarian thinking is traditional to Africa and it propagates in children, a life in which one shares in the fate of the other, where products of an individual's talents and endowments are regarded as assets of the community.

While the communitarian school of philosophy seems to facilitate care for the people who are members of our own immediate community, Philosophy for Children students come to respect and value individuals and cultural differences because of their potential to provoke critical inquiry and lead to more moral meanings and developing thinking habits. As such, the community of inquiry does not call on participants to merely adapt to these ideas and methods of the dominant group or be excluded. Like Dewey's democratic community, the advocates for Philosophy for Children recommend that the classroom 'community of inquiry' expand out-

wards and make connections with other communities (Splitter & Sharp, 1995) while 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.

### Philosophy for Children: the question of method

Gyekye (1997) has posited that philosophy of some kind is always behind or involved in the thought and action of every people and every culture, thus produces a system of philosophy incomplete. To that end, he concludes that:

*philosophical concepts, ideas, and propositions can be found embedded in African proverbs, linguistic expressions, myths, folktales, religious beliefs and rituals, customs and traditions of the people...* (1997: xxxv).

For Oruka (1991), every reasonable person in society is supposed to be conversant with the philosophy of his culture and therefore “in a free and well-informed society, every reasonable person (should be) is conversant with the prevailing culture philosophy” (Oruka, 1991:52). Stories and proverbs (as will be shown below) are primary ways through which a great deal of African philosophical thought, knowledge and wisdom has been taught (Gyekye, 1997).

Philosophy that can be said to be African can only

*be seen as growing out of a history of systematic reflection on widespread, pre-reflective beliefs about the nature of humankind, and the purposes, and about our knowledge of and our place in the cosmos* (Appiah, 1992:86).

It is when African traditional *beliefs* are subjected to systematic and critical analysis, in which reasons and arguments play a central role that we speak of African philosophy. This marks the development of the analytic tradition in African philosophy. These analytical attributes include, but not limited to: “the habit of exactness and rigour in thinking, the pursuit of systematic coherence and experimental approach”. It is on this backdrop that I argue that philosophy for children should start from the African experience.

Children in Africa can be exposed to do philosophy at an early age by reflecting on, analysing and interpreting their traditional beliefs, customs, habits and histories using their own local languages as the medium of analysis as (Fasiku, 2008:101) informs us, “different kinds of people, with different languages, cause their speakers to construe reality in different ways”. It is in this respect that language becomes important as a tool in the formation of metaphysical and epistemological ideas, developing social and moral consciousness of a people. Inherent in African ethno-philosophy, for example are concepts, such as: beauty; being; causation; evil; God; good; illusion; justice; knowledge; life; meaning; mind; person; reality; truth; right; understanding; and wrong.

Children in Africa can analyse and synthesise African traditional thoughts, beliefs, world-views, concepts and through the traditional tools such as their vernacular and cultural background of folklores, tales, proverbs and puzzles. As Akporobaro and Emovon, (1994:1) sum up:

*... the proverbs of a community or nation is in a real sense an ethnography of the people, which if systematized can give a penetrating picture of the people's way of life, their philosophy, their criticism of life, moral truths and social values.*

And in Africa, proverbs have a different function and level of theoretical meaning that make them key components, as well as expressions of a culture's viewpoints on a variety of important topics and problems. For example, among the Yoruba, the proverb has become so interwoven with living speech that can be heard at anytime and occasion. Proverbs, among the

Yoruba also serve as means of achieving clarity and conciseness in discourse. When a Yoruba proverb says that '*A proverb is the horse which carries a subject under discussion along; if a subject under discussion goes astray, we use a proverb to track it*' this shows that in every statement made to reflect decisions taken by Yoruba people, proverbs are vehicles used in driving home their points. Children can thus be introduced to aptly employ proverbs in their vernacular deliberations on issues of interests as they explore concepts in their culture.

According to Mbiti (1970) it is in proverbs that the world of the Africans comes alive and prevails in science, metaphysics, logic, religion, and all other human endeavours ever known to humans. In support Makinde (1985) proposes treating traditional African sayings as valuable source-material for serious academic philosophical reflection because:

*Although ... it is not a philosophy, it has in it a great stock of ideas that generate various philosophical issues, including metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, and science, of which the most developed is traditional medical science* (1985:5).

I agree with Makinde as he pares away useless or "outmoded" ideas, leaving some of "tradition" behind as he comments:

*A great deal of African philosophy has its roots in cultural beliefs, some of which are not worth courting. Some of these beliefs may be regarded as outmoded in the 20th Century world and so ought to be forgotten* (1988:5).

For Makinde, the philosophical task is to receive the messages of the past and to, carefully adjudicate what is worthy of passing on to the present generation.

Thus, stories and proverbs can be understood as metaphors to guide moral choice and self-examination because when reflected upon they act as mirrors for seeing things in a particular way. More than any theoretical discussion, Van Manen (1990) underscores this point when he opines that they throw light on the concrete reality of lived experience; they serve as important pedagogical devices because they provide essential case material on which pedagogical reflection is possible. As learners analyse the proverbs and stories, they are able to reflect on the meanings and implications embedded in the experiences.

Most of the African oral narratives targeted at the children audience are forms of entertainment; the main reasons behind them are among other things for instructing, moulding of characters, and preparing them for adult roles (Nkata, 2001). The themes and moral messages reflect the values of the society in which the stories are told. Some of the values which most Africans cherish as revealed in the oral narratives are honesty; hard work leading to achievement; perseverance; courage; respect for elders; obedience to the society and consideration for others. Other themes revealed in the oral narratives are warnings against: greed; laziness and gluttony which are rebuked.

From the above discussion, I argue that Philosophy for Children programme in the African milieu should attempt to recover the aforementioned pedagogies of traditional Africa and integrate them into the content and processes of education in Africa. In support of traditional methods of philosophical inquiry Bodunrin (1991) concludes that there is no *a priori* reason why proverbs, myths of gods and angels and social practices could not be proper subjects of philosophical inquiry. I propose a creative recovery of the traditional ways of doing philosophical inquiry with children through taking a critical look at certain aspects of tradition that may have been effective in Africa's past but now need to be re-appropriated in new ways to serve today's purposes. Chinua Achebe, in his clarion call to save the African child from what he termed 'the beautifully packaged poison' imported into the continent in form of children's story books, has advised African writers for children to draw from the infinite treasury of African oral tradition (Chakava, 1998). Achebe is alarmed at the way African children are

being fed with story books that do not reflect in any way the realities of their immediate social cultural values.

## Hybridisation

Hybridity is a post-colonial construct to describe the cultural mixtures and multi-layered forms of interactions between the civilizations of the colonized and those of the colonizers (Kanu, 2007). It is a form of intellectual and political cross-fertilisation. Bhabha (1985) looks at hybridity when applied to educational reform as a 'third space', which places for the construction of identities that are neither one nor the other. Post-colonial Africa no longer has a unitary set of discourse about education but rather a hybrid, a third space where local African and western images meet in a weaving that has its own implications and configurations. But Masolo finds little in the African past that can be applied to the present and future of the continent. He believes that:

*philosophers who are seeking to retrieve and reinstate the traditional African philosophy as appropriate philosophy for Africa today are doing disservice to Africa in trying to pretend that that philosophy is still sufficient or useful or applicable to the African needs (1995:225).*

Nevertheless, Gyekye (1996:174) insists there are:

*many cultural values and practices of traditional Africa (that) can be considered positive features of the culture and can be accommodated in the scheme of African modernity, even though they must undergo some refinement and pruning to become fully harmonious with the spirit of modern culture and to function ... satisfactorily within that culture.*

I support the view that a total rejection of the African heritage "will leave African societies in a vacuum that can only be filled with confusion, loss of identity, and a total break in inter-generational communication" (Boateng, 1983:335-336). To that end, it may well be argued that Philosophy for Children in the 21st century African milieu would best occur in a third space, which recognises the heterogeneous basis of knowledge and "the need to find abiding links that connect African knowledge and values entailed in western education" (Kanu, 2007:78). Such hybridity produces knowledge that can best be described as an alloy of racial, cultural and ethnic metals (McCarthy, 1998). Philosophy for Children in Africa, as argued in this study, should be a hybrid of the traditional African philosophical background and the western conceptions of knowledge/education in a bid to produce adults who are equipped the 21st century. This Africanising of the Philosophy for Children programme involves:

*... incorporating, adapting and integrating other cultures into and through African visions to provide the dynamism, evolution and flexibility so essential in the global times (Makgoba, 1997:199).*

To that end, "the centrality of the African reality would not negate other realities that enrich the human corpus of knowledge" (Nkomo 2000, 56). Therefore, the purpose of hybridisation is to de-mystify, de-mythologise and de-construct the prevailing knowledge universalism. Mugambi's pragmatic argument seems to support the concept of hybridization of western and traditional African forms of doing philosophy with children:

*... As long as we continue talking Africanisation and 'going back to our roots' yet we remain quiet on the reality of modern society, we will sound foolish, outdated and out of touch with reality ... (T)he effects of westernization are here to stay and the faster we adapt to living with them the better for us and generations to come (Mugambi, 1998:111).*

Within this in mind, Obotetukudo (2001) is convinced that one may not necessarily advocate a return to an African past in its entirety, because that would be romanticizing a past that is no

longer there — it would be part nostalgia and part lamentation. While colonialism, christianisation, islamisation and commercialization have all combined to erode pieces of Africa's past, these outside elements have also enriched Africans' experiences and experiments in self-preservation and cultural conservatism.

### The challenges

With the assumptions about the nature of education through Philosophy for Children, it follows that all the components of traditional African education as well as colonial education need to be rethought. This includes: the curriculum; the role of the teacher; and the purpose of examinations; individual versus social inquiry; competitive activities in the schools; the architecture of schools and classrooms; and the aims of education. Such changes can be very upsetting for those who thought they understood the nature of education as the accumulation of knowledge from a western perspective. This kind of change can be not only quite expensive but also frightening and threatening to those who are committed to maintaining the *status quo* (Sharp, 2003). However, it must be realized that nothing is as hard for a person as shifting from one paradigm to another because it requires that he/she rethinks everything; reconstructing everything he/she thought he/she knew; and begin afresh to try to make sense of things in a whole new world of understanding. Being the creatures of habit that we are we are bound to resist such major changes to our philosophical systems.

### Conclusion

The paper has demonstrated the potential of the Philosophy for Children programme in Africa. I have argued for the need to recover the creative aspects of traditional African education and ways of philosophizing that now need to be re- conceptualised in new ways that serve today's purposes. However it is the conviction of this presentation that despite the robust thoughts of Lipman on Philosophy for Children, the programme may require to adoption of indigenous factors to scaffold its theory and practice. In the final analysis I propose adopting the Philosophy for Children programme as it is rooted in the African existential circumstances.

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