World of Basic Education Learner: Ground for Moral Autonomy Cultivation in Contemporary Nigeria

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Abstract: An autonomous moral being is also a rational, historical, cultural and social being. The social nature of man makes it possible for man to interact with other fellow human beings. The success of human interaction is based on moral codes which tend to regulate human actions and reactions. In traditional African experience, ethical values include hard work, self-reliance, dignity in labour, contentment, patience, tolerance, respect for and sacredness of human life, respect for elders and being a brother's keeper. These priceless ethical behaviours guide man's perception of Being and other beings. Unfortunately, these values seem to have abdicated the throne of grace as witnessed in the increasing wave of crime, corruption, abuse of office, and the attendance loss of life and dignity of human person. It is against this situation these authors attempt to analyse the world of the basic education learner as ground for cultivating moral autonomy in contemporary Nigeria. In doing this, these authors employed the philosophical analysis approach in analysing the Nigerian moral environment, world of basic education learner, Kohlberg's theory of cognitive moral development, moral autonomy, challenges of developing moral autonomy in the learner, developing moral autonomy through the world of the basic education learner. The importance of this paper is to provide school managers and teachers with better understanding of how the learner ethically conduct themselves and build a conducive environment where the learner can cultivate healthy moral behaviour.

Keywords: Cultivation, Contemporary Nigeria, Moral Autonomy, Moral Development, World of Basic Education Learner

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INTRODUCTION

An independent-thinking-emotional being is essentially a morally autonomous being. Since Socrates said knowledge is a correlate of moral virtue, philosophers became sceptical about what type of knowledge would bring about moral virtues. Is it every type of knowledge that would encourage moral virtue or good ethical behaviour? That, the more one acquires knowledge one would be morally virtuous. Does this imply that if one has good knowledge of mathematical principles one's level of morality would be very high? This is not what Socrates meant when he said that knowledge has a relationship with moral virtue. Knowledge acquired through school subjects, or courses at the tertiary level, may not necessary make one moral or an agency. Moral knowledge was what Socrates talked about, not academic knowledge or intelligence. Moral knowledge as a presupposition of moral autonomy is the height of man's moral development (Omoregbe, 2001). The issue here is, does man possess moral knowledge that could lead to moral autonomy? How best can moral virtue be taught? Is it possible for school subjects to provide the learner the opportunity to become a moral agent? These questions are anchored on the premise that rational men always strive to attain the highest level of moral consciousness, in order to live a morally healthy life.

If the basic education learner is educated to become an independent-thinking-emotional being, as stated in the National Policy on Education (NPE), it suffices to say that the learner supposedly possesses the capacity of a rational being. By extension, all rational beings are social, cultural, historical, mental and moral beings in their own rights. The attainment of moral autonomy as the highest stage of moral development is a natural tendency in men. According to Kohlberg's (1969) theory of cognitive moral development, there are three stages of moral development, which include pre-conventional stage, conventional stage and post-conventional stage. These stages are functions of age, awareness, experience, and maturity. If moral consciousness is a function of these elements, it means that the attainment of moral autonomy is procedural rather than spontaneous in its realisation. This is because to be autonomous is to be a rational being. From this assertion, our rationality would be a build up from certain epistemological activities which take place in the human mind (Dearden, 1975; Omoregbe, 2008). These epistemological activities include some of the following reflecting, contemplating, doubting, daydreaming, speculating, thinking, reasoning, imagining, hating, love, believing, judging, among other things. The basic education learner explores these epistemological activities in their day-to-day activities. One peculiarity about the basic education learner is that they live in a world within a world. It is like what the Judeo-Christian religion says about Christians, that, they are in the world but not of the world. The world of the basic education learner is characterized by freedom, love, forgiveness, peace, and understanding. Their ideas about these concepts further reveal that their world is characterized by relativism rather than absolutism. The drift from absolutism to relativism is not occasioned by the basic education learner, but the happenings and conditionings which originate from the adult world.

As a social being, the social nature of the basic education learner makes it possible for them to interact with other fellow human beings. This is because the success of human interaction is based on moral codes which tend to regulate human conducts, actions and reactions. In traditional African experience, ethical values include hardwork, self-reliance, dignity in labour, contentment, patience, tolerance, respect for and sacredness of human life, respect for elders and being a brother's keeper (Ozumba, 1995). These priceless ethical behaviours guide the learner's perception of Being and other beings. Unfortunately, these values seem to have abdicated the throne of grace as witnessed in the increasing wave of crime, corruption, abuse of office, and the attendance loss of life and dignity of human person. It is against this situation these authors attempt to analyse the world of the basic education learner as ground for cultivating moral autonomy in contemporary Nigeria. In doing this, these authors employed the philosophical analysis approach in analysing the Nigerian moral environment, world of basic education learner, Kohlberg's theory of cognitive moral development, moral autonomy, challenges of developing autonomy in the learner, developing moral autonomy through the world of the learner. The importance of this paper is that it will provide school managers and teachers with literature which would make them have better understanding of how the learner ethically conduct themselves, build a conducive environment where they can cultivate healthy moral behaviours.

The Nigerian Moral Environment

It is the desire of the Nigerian contemporary society to build a Nigerian society on democratic principles such as freedom, equality and social justice; where every individual can realize themselves and become authentic participants in every sector of the economy. The Nigerian society also identifies certain worthwhile qualities that would help the learner realize the goal of building a democratic and egalitarian society. These qualities were specified in the National Policy on Education as follows: (a) respect for the worth and dignity of the individuals; (b) faith in man's ability to make rational decisions; (c) moral and spiritual principles in interpersonal and human relations; (d) shared responsibility for the common good of society; (e) respect for the dignity of labour; and (f) promotion of the physical, emotional, and psychological development of the learner (FRN, 1998).

These qualities are what the individual learner would cultivate to make them a better citizen. These qualities would also encourage them to develop sustainable moral values and ethical behaviours. However, an appraisal of these qualities of instruction reveals that the individual learner must first of all respect the worth and dignity of everyman before other qualities can be realized. The task of education is to make the learner believe in themselves as an individual and a person with the capacity to do what is right, carry out certain responsibilities independently without fear or favour. If this can be achieved, it therefore means that the learner would be capable of having faith in the other person's ability to make rational decisions. It is the worth of every man that encourages the other to have faith in someone else's ability to carry out certain task. Against this background, the learner

would understand that they were not only beings-in-themselves but a being living with other beings in a given environment. This amounts to giving consideration and preference to other beings before oneself. Within this scenario, there comes the need to do certain things in common as beings-in-the-world. Goodness, neighbourliness, tolerance, hardwork, honesty, love, respect for constituted authority, being our brother's keeper, obedience, loyalty among others become the responsibility of all, not selected few in society. The growth and development of society become the responsibility of all citizens; and for us to share our responsibilities as a people we need to recognize the fact that every work or job is important to the growth, development and progress of man. As beings with rational tendencies, we must recognize the work of the individual as potential contribution to the well-being of men and welfare of society. The acceptance of this claim suggested that the task of education would be to promote the physical, emotional and psychological aspects of the individual learner to lead a course of reasoning for the betterment of themselves and the community.

Because social standards are not always the same as social reality, we can say that the desire to build a society on democratic principles demands that the individual learner ought to inculcate workable moral and ethical values for the development of themselves and others. However, the Nigerian contemporary society, like every other society, is witnessing moral decadence in every aspect of life. Lack of respect for human life and dignity, cybercrime, prostitution, human trafficking, sales of human organs, ritualism, lack of respect for constituted authority, lack of respect for values among others point at the collapse of ethical values in every society. The introduction of Civic Education, Social Studies, Moral Education, and more recently, the re-introduction of History into the school Curriculum seems not to raise the moral (awareness) consciousness of the individual learner.

The World of Basic Education Learner

The basic education learner at the junior secondary school level falls within Kohlberg's conventional stage. Their age bracket makes them fit into the adolescent group. The adolescent learner is basically a special kind of learner or individual who lives in a world different from the main adult world. Borrowing from the Judeo-Christian religion, the adolescent learner is in the world but does not belong to the world. The characteristic features of this world consist of freedom, love, forgiveness, and understanding (Kneller, 1971; Momodu, Maha & Ireyefoju, 2020). The adolescent learner is neither a child nor and adult; the learner believes that since they are in-between two worlds they ought to be allowed, in their our rights, to explore from within and without what they consider as reality, truth and values (Knight, 1997). In the course of exploring their world, they believe that mistakes would always arise, therefore, the task of adult world is to accommodate them and their world. Unfortunately, in the African experience, the learner is regarded as one who could not think, doubt, imagine, make value judgment and take responsibility for their actions. For this purpose, they are made to learn and follow established moral and social standards as guide and sign-post. The learner navigates the adult world bearing in mind the level of inconsistencies in the adult world and desire to be forgiven whenever they

make mistakes. They want others, particularly the adult, to look at a given situation from their own perspective. Hence their concept of freedom, love, forgiveness and understanding knows no boundary.

Their concept of moral values and ethical behaviours is occasioned by their definition of what reality, truth and values are within the context of their world. For instance, what could be their understanding of respect for others, honesty, dignity in labour, righteousness, courtesy, consideration and propriety? Some scholars believe that these moral values have faded away with time because the learner has gradually disregarded these ethical values as a result of lack of self-discipline and self-control particularly when under pressure (https://www.bartleby.com/writing/FKJKM85ZTC). However, these authors do not share the views of these scholars in the sense that these ethical values still remain what they are, even though some persons believe that they are no longer tenable because of the rate at which people threw them overboard, and take the easiest alternative way out of any given situation. Moral values and ethical standards are ways through which we define what is right or wrong. They come from individual experience, family, community, religion, government, or any other entity that influence the thought of the individual. Moral values the school can inculcate in the learner among other things are: acceptance, compassion, consideration, dignity, courage, equality, generosity, gratitude, diversity and individual rights. Others include fairness, honesty, integrity, kindness, perseverance, politeness, respect, responsibility, tolerance, self-control and trustworthy. Ethical behaviour is acting in ways consistent with what a society or an individual typically thinks are good values. Examples of ethical behaviours among others are: obedience, loyalty, law abiding, self-discipline, honesty, responsibility and tolerance. Others include: self-control, trustworthy, respect, dignity, integrity, generosity and gratitude.

Kohlberg's Theory of Cognitive Moral Development

The cognitive moral development theory was divided into six stages, placed in three broad categories. For Kohlberg, the learner develops morally through the pre-conventional stage, the conventional stage and post-conventional stage. At the pre-conventional stage, the learner is mostly ruled by instincts. Their level of morality is based on what they need at a particular point in time. The pre-conventional stage is likened to pre-morality or amoral, a stage of moral development categorized as being without law. In the conventional stage of morality, the learner's morality exists on what is termed acceptable by forces outside them. These forces include parents, authorities, significant others and institutions which are custodian of human behaviours. This stage is similar to heteronomy or socionomy – where laws are imposed by parents, elders, or society. At the post-conventional stage, the learner comes to realize the importance of morality and he is convinced of the need to act in a morally acceptable way not because they are told to do so. At this stage, the individual is ruled by their conscience and abides by the rules because for them it is good to do so. The post-conventional stage can be placed in the same category as autonomy – a stage where moral judgement comes from within the individual. The above categories were further divided into two broad groups: custom morality and

conscience morality (Uyanga, 2010). Custom morality is that level of morality in which the learner conducts himself in accordance with the customs of the group which they belong. Conscience morality is that level of moral development in which the conduct that appears right to the individual is that approved by their own individual judgement of what is right or wrong (Uyanga, 2010). Moral development implies that the learner will gradually move from one stage of development to the other as a function of age and experience. However, there is no clear-cut demarcation between one stage and the other, yet each stage can be identified in the learner's behaviour and action. It is pertinent to state here that moral autonomy is an ideal stage which cannot be attained, but we all strive towards its attainment because it is a guide to a healthy moral life. In the process of striving to attain it, the learner must journey through custom morality before they can decide on conscience morality which will lead to moral autonomy.

Kohlberg's Theory of Cognitive Moral Development Model places emphasis on age, awareness, experience and ratiocination as determinants for learning. In adopting this cognitive moral development modal theory, Kohlberg believed that moral development was also a function of cognition – age, maturity, awareness, and experience. Age and maturity as functions of reason are also applicable to moral issues which sometimes placed the learner in a dilemma. Whatever decision taken by the learner is a function of the learner's level of moral consciousness. Hence Kohlberg claimed that moral issues are functions of the individual's psychological frame of mind – the extent to which a person is independent in her thought, action, and reaction. That is to say, moral values and ethical behaviours of the learner are functions of age, maturity, and capacity to rationalize axiological issues on the basis of personal conviction (Ireyefoju, 2014). If personal conviction is the highest level of Kohlberg's theory of cognitive moral development, the educational task of school administration would be to lead the learner, particularly, the adolescent to a point where they would believe in the existential self and learn to take responsibility for their actions, reactions to issues, happenings and conditionings of the environment.

Moral Autonomy

Autonomy is derived from two words "auto" meaning self and "nomos" meaning norm or rule. Therefore autonomy means self-rule. It is a self-directed activity as well as recognition of principles which guide the autonomous activities of a moral being (Iheoma, 1995). Iheoma went further to say that being autonomous implies being independent-minded, not relying on external forces before one can act in a prescribed way. It means being able to do the right thing because one is convinced it is right and not because it is imposed on them by an authority. It is concerned with the capacity of individuals to form, revise and to pursue a conception of the good and to deliberate in accordance with it (Blake, 2001).

Moral autonomy is self-reflecting and self-directed of the individual who form personal guiding moral principles to check their behaviours, actions and reactions because they are social beings living with others. Moral autonomy allows the individual to express his freedom within acceptable limits. Morally autonomous beings regulate their lives by rules which they have accepted and understood. Who, then, is a morally autonomous being, or what constitute a morally autonomous being? While subscribing to Dearden's attributes of morally autonomous beings, Uyanga and Aminigo (2010) state the following characteristics:

a) wondering and asking what the justification is for various things which would be quite natural to take for granted;

b) refusing agreement or compliance with what others put to him when it seems critically unacceptably;

c) defining what he really wants or what is really in his interest as distinct from what may be conventionally so regarded;

d) conceiving of goals, policies and plans of independence of any pressure to do so from others;

e) freely choosing among given alternative;

f) forming his opinion on a variety of topics that interest him;

g) governing his actions and attributes in the light of his own thinking and judgement; and

h) accomplishing tasks out of the desire to do so and not as a result of coercion or manipulation of any kind.

From the above, it suffices to say that a morally autonomous being is a person who has understanding of the need to abide by moral codes of conduct and is definitely independent minded. He is that person who pursues self-chosen ideals; he understands that he is an actor, not a spectator, partly an author of his life. A morally autonomous individual chooses to stand for fairness, truthfulness, justice, respect the dignity of human beings among other things. He is a person that stands for what is right in the long run while disregarding immediate gratification that will accrue to him if acted otherwise, which leads to promoting the common good of man and society.

Challenges of Developing Moral Autonomy in the Basic Education Learner

The world of the basic education learner is real and peculiar to them and others. But, adults seem not to believe in it because they claim that the more freedom they (basic education learner) enjoy the more mischievous they become. Adolescence is not an intoxicant but a way of life which everyone has to undergo. The dynamics of adolescent activities do not suggest that they are out to control. Truly, they are ambitious and willing to succeed at all cost compared to the past when their type were

more complacent, allow nature or Absolute Being to take their course. There are people who succeed this way by following and maintaining the order of things. So also they are people who see this order of things as hindrance in the path of progress. At the end, they also achieve greatness. None of this approach is bad or good. This is because what matters most is the internal consistency and determination of the individual.

Another challenge that could hinder the path of moral autonomy is the belief that the adolescent learner can never do what is right, except they are strictly monitored. Reason and reasoning are functions of our level of ratiocination. Reason is not distributed equally to every individual. This is because reason is a product of so many factors. Our behaviour, action and conduct are functions of our level of reason. We need to allow the learner to explore their environment, take responsibility for their actions, and accept the consequence of their actions. Monitoring them may be right, on one hand, and it may provide grounds for other strategies to evade their parents' reactions, on the other hand.

Unless the learner is allowed to reflect, doubt, reason, contemplate, imagine, think, and engage in other mental activities which occur in the mind, moral autonomy may be difficult to cultivate. Essentially, moral autonomy is to rely on one's own internal consistency and beliefs, which have guided one's thought and conduct towards a given object of knowledge. The learner must be seen as a being in his own right so that they can cultivate independence, belief and trust in one's own capacity to do what is right (Okoroh, 2000). For instance, when an individual does what is inappropriate it is the adult that would explain the action and consequence of the learner's action, rather than the learner in question. It is true that no one is born with moral knowledge and the adult is not all-knowing. Since every individual has some degree of reason in them they can as well provide explanation or give meaning for their actions.

The world of the adult is too judgemental and unbearable for the adolescent learner. Some parents, significant others, and institutions are more catholic than the Pope. They want everything to be perfectly done; any deviation is brutally condemned. There is nothing wrong when an action is condemned, but if the individual is also condemned it becomes a very serious issue. To fall or fail is of no consequence; it is the refusal to stand up and move on that matter most in falling or failing. So many condemnations are to make the individual see themselves as complete failure. Thank goodness, most individuals have learned to look beyond the condemnation thrown at them. This is because they deliberately refuse to be labelled. Furthermore, the road to moral autonomy demands some sacrifice, commitment and ability to remain resolute in the face of danger. Moral autonomy is not only expressed in words but also in action. It is exemplified in integrity, character and choices we make in life. The basic education learner is a child of integrity in their own right. Unfortunately, some of them abuse their freedom and fall short of the grace bestowed upon them by the Absolute Being. The morally autonomous being is an agency that does things for the sake of it, not because of what people would say about them. They are models of what they stand for at all time.

Developing Moral Autonomy through the World of the Learner

The right to freedom and the capacity to engage in series of activities which take place in the human mind is the basis for cultivating moral autonomy through the world of the basic education learner. This is not whether they will misuse their freedom, or differentiate between right or wrong, but the right to take certain decision in life is their prerogative. As a rational-moral-cultural-social-cum-historical being, the learner as a function of their environment is a product of what they consider as reality, truth, and values. Whatever is derived from this consideration informs the basis for their moral consciousness – awareness, experience, and how they conduct themselves. How best, then, can moral autonomy be cultivated in the basic education learner?

Moral autonomy as an educational goal can be inculcated in the individual learner by mapping out their passion, interest, happenings and conditionings in the environment, human relationships among other variables. This is because no one can grow over and above his consciousness. And when consciousness becomes conscious of itself there is a possibility for one to live the authentic life, which is equivalent to moral autonomy (Unah, 2002). The essence of it is not to teach them the "what" and "why" of things only, but to also analyse the "how" of things and the capacity to provide evidence for their conducts and behaviours. For example, the learner is not exposed to controversial issues such as sex and sexuality, ethnicity, religious superiority among other controversial issues in the schooling system. But, why not? They see, hear, feel and participate in these issues directly or indirectly. The learner's position in all of this is not to blindly support a particular posture but to provide evidence for their stand in a given argument. It is such stand that would drive them towards living an authentic life or become morally autonomous.

Moral autonomy can also be cultivated when the view and opinion of the learner is sought. They feel recognized and important when their view and person are recognized. This is because they would not feel alienated. Particularly, when parents sought and accept the opinion of the learner on the type of car, television, furniture to purchase, and food to cook in the home. When their opinions are welcomed they develop some level of independence, self-confidence and sense of belonging in themselves and things around. The learner with some level of independence, self-confidence may build some level of trust in their judgement and faith in other person's ability. However, it is good to bear in mind that it is not their choices that really matter, but the reasons provided for their choices that help to build their level of moral consciousness.

Moral autonomy is a virtue which can be inculcated but it cannot be learned like the way historical process and mathematical principles are learned in the classroom. This is not to say that moral autonomy cannot be taught in the school system, it can, but the approach is different. Passmore (in Ireyefoju & Mogbeyiteren, 2009) says that virtues cannot be taught the way swimming is, or the way mathematical principles are, taught, but can be learned through the process of upbringing in the

family system, social interactions and pick-ups in an educational environment. This is because virtues are way of life of a people. It is what the learner is initiated into through series of educational activities which take place in traditional ceremonies and rites, contest and dance, folk story and drama, debate and argumentative essay writing, voluntary organisations such as Boys' Scout, Man O' War, Girls' Guard and others).

Implication for Educational Administration

If virtue is a way of life and our knowledge of what is virtuous is informed by upbringing, interaction, social awareness, experience, happenings around us, and cognition as a function of age, experience and maturity, the level of moral consciousness of the learner would largely depend on how all this play in the mind of the learner. This is because whatever one wishes to become is a function of the happenings that take place in the human mind. The role of school managers and teachers would be to create a conducive classroom environment where active learning, freedom and independence of the learner are guaranteed.

CONCLUSION

The possibility of cultivating moral autonomy through the happenings in the world of the basic education learner is to utilize the series of mental activities that take place in their minds and the social interactions which take place in their world as springboard for building a morally healthy individual. Their recognition of the series of autonomous activities and stands in any social interaction are signs of moral autonomy. They do not need to be told of being morally autonomous because the tendency is inherent in them. To be morally autonomous, in the idealist sense, is to be a man of integrity.

Suggestions

We are suggesting that for moral education or any other school subjects to bring about a morally autonomous being, the basic education learner should be made to realized that they are moral agent in their own rights, not because religion, religious authorities say that they must be morally good. It is the nature of man to be good and whatever good one wishes for himself he wishes for others. For no one wishes himself evil, but good; for what we wish ourselves is what we wish others. Moral autonomy cannot be taught like mathematics, history or any other subjects in the time-table. This is because moral autonomy is an educational goal which needs to be realized through the process of teaching and learning. It is therefore suggested that social interaction, pick up from the teacher and fellow learners in the process of interaction could be a way of cultivating moral autonomy in the learner. In addition, we must fall back to our traditional values which justifies the statement: "I am because we are" for no one can exist and survive as a distinct person without leaning on others for their existence. No nation can be on the right path without morally developed individuals. It is important to emphasis the building of relationship on democratic principles such as justice, equity, fairness, dignity of man, cooperation, tolerance, and common good of humanity. Above all, the Nigerian contemporary society

is in there need of value orientation which can be made possible when the role of ethics is emphasized in all aspects of our social existence.

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