An Analysis of the Nexus of Existentialism in Education

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Abstract: This study sought to examine the bond between existentialism and Education. Two objectives, namely: To examine key concepts of Existentialism and their Educational referents, and to investigate educational implications of existentialism, informed the sub areas under investigation. Using Philosophical analysis the paper investigates the key principles of Existentialism like Anguish, Freedom and Responsibility, and proceeds to attempt to find the place of Existentialism in the aims of education, curriculum, roles of the teacher and the learner, learning environment and Methods of teaching. The study infers that existential locus in education lies in the promotion and uplifting of the individuality of the learner and the teacher, alongside promoting the subsequent freedom that facilitates communion between the learner and the teacher. Finally the study infers the connectivity between the aims of education and the curriculum.

Key words: Existentialism, Education, Freedom, Communion.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Back Ground of Study

The Term Existentialism was first used by the French Philosopher and Essayist, Jean Paul Sartre (1905 -1980) to describe his life. The term is derived from the ontological Concept of 'Existence' which literally means 'to be there'. Its ontological complementary concept is ‘Essence’ which means ‘what a thing is’ or ‘the quiddity of that which is’. For instance that Socrates is, means that he has that which makes him to be what he is. As a school of Philosophy, Existentialism is “a theory about Existence” (Bailey, 1954). It dates back to the period of the First-World War-Europe. In normal metaphysical order, essence (what a thing is) precedes its Existence (that a thing is). Its definition determines its existence and not vice versa. However, in Existentialism, Existence precedes Essence; that is to say, a thing is what it is by virtue of its existence.

Apart from Jean Paul Sartre, some of the proponents of Existentialism include Soren Kierkegaard, Freidreich Wilhelm Nietzsche, Karl Jaspers, Karl Barth, Gabriel Marcel, Maurice Merlau Ponty, Martin Buber among others (Bailey, 1954). It is also crucial to note that the birth of Existentialism has its germane in the ancient Philosophy of Socrates and Stoicism, and in the thoughts of Augustine of Hippo, Blaise Pascale, Arthur Schopenhauer and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Socrates as a precursory Philosopher of existentialism is considered the father of Western Philosophy, the teacher of Plato and the first of the anthropocentric Greek Philosophers. He invented a profound method of teaching in which he used questions to probe his students and the wider public. On their part, the stoics taught that nothing that troubles ‘man’ is from without him; rather it is from within. Yet what is without, does not belong to a human being per se, it is beyond his control. Among the with-outs are people’s opinions, our bodies, power, wealth, reputation -they do not belong to us. What belong to us (the with-ins) make us totally free; they are our ideas and the status we decide to fix our mind in (Popkin & Stroll, 1996).

Kierkegaard (1813-1855) was a theist existentialist brought up in a deeply Christian and intellectual milieu. As would be expected, he not only espoused intellectual life in his early years but also immersed himself into a deep Christian spirituality. He excelled in Greek and Latin. He read Hegel’s idealism but revolted against it in preference to social oriented pursuit and though he was an ascetic and a committed Christian, he criticized Christianity as practiced during his time in Denmark. He criticized the objectivity found in Science and Christianity and advocated for subjective leap of faith. Kierkegaard believed this was the only way to become an authentic Christian. The leap of faith requires “one...(to)...abandon reason and accept groundless belief” (Ozmon & Craver,1995). According to Kierkegaard, life is journey divided into three stages, namely, the Aesthetic stage, filled with emotions and Sensuality, Ethical Stage, where humans get to understand their place and function in life, and the Religious Stage which is the most important and where we stand alone before God, and which requires passion, not intellectual reflection (Cronin, 2005).

On his part, Sartre grew up in an academic family. His Grandfather was a language Teacher. He inspired him to become a teacher of Philosophy and his academic pursuit led him to German and France. His joining of the French army during World War II, exposed him to the brutality of the Nazis and subsequent Intellectual conversion, that acted as impetus for him to philosophize over human predicament which led to the birth of his first treatise, L’Etre et le Néant(Being and Nothingness)(Ozmon & Craver,1995). Being and Nothingness examines consciousness (Le Poursoi) and the objects of consciousness (L’ensoi). Le Poursoi is the reflection on and the negation of the objective world. This implies that human consciousness is its object, its own teacher and that a human being is an individual.
For Sartre, Human existence became basically meaningless. He states, “We are thrown into the world without meaning” (Sartre, 1943) and as such a human being is the maker of all meanings he finds in the world. Furthermore, there is no God to give meaning whatsoever and so without God we are totally free even to commit suicide (if this be the ultimate meaning) because after all, Life is meaningless and “Man is Condemned to be Free” (Sartre as cited in Ozmon & Craver, 1995), but of course this is followed by responsibility. The key tenet of existentialism is thus respect for Subjectivism as exhibited in anthropocentrism. *Ipso facto*, its main subject matter is human being because a human being is the center of existence. Bailey (1954) observes that for an existentialist “…it is man who knows; things only exist when man knows them.” (p. 7). This means that anything else has, not real existence but probable existence. The First Principle of existentialism has it that “man is nothing else but what he makes himself, therefore Existence is primary” (Bailey, 1954). Humans are thus incomplete projects as long as they still live. They are not predefined beings. The Aristotelian Rational Animal is thus for an existentialist “An experiential and incomplete project”.

The second principle is about Choice and authenticity. Life is choice and choice is life. Humans must choose out of the many experiences life throws to them. A human being is actually the sum total of his/her authentic and honest choices, indeed man “…exists only so far as he realizes himself” (Cronin, 2005). As observed from this principle Man is a being unto himself. He is a subject with all powers to choose and to determine himself. With this principle also comes the value of freedom.

On the other hand, the term education comes from the Latin verb *educare* referring to the general process of growing up, of rearing, of bringing up…. Originally, it designated both the rearing of plants, animals and the bringing up of children. Based on this definition, education has come to be viewed as the art of molding, of giving form to an incomplete or delicate person or a child. According to Peters (1966) Education has three conditions, namely Desirability condition, Cognitive condition and Procedural condition. Desirability condition indicates that Education must involve the transmission of what is worthwhile, valuable or desirable. Cognitive condition states that Education must involve knowledge and understanding, and some kind of cognitive perspective. This is also called the knowledge condition of education while Procedural condition states that Education rules out certain procedures of transmission that lacks willingness and volunteries on the part of the learner. Njoroge and Bennars (1986) have reflected on these criteria and proposed four dimensions of Education. These are the Cognitive, Creative, Normative and Dialogical dimensions. According to Njoroge and Bennars, Cognitive dimension demands that Education must involve the development of knowledge and understanding while Creative dimension focuses on the development of individuality. The normative dimension is about Socialization, and the dialogical dimension promotes dialogue. In the general parlance of Education, several areas are put into the spot, that is, Aims of education, Curriculum, Teaching methods, Teacher and learner, Assessment, Learning environment among others. This aspects shall be used in the subsequent sections of this research.

1.2. Statement of the problem

Philosophy and Education are closely related concepts. They both deal with mental operations. Education however extends beyond the mind to the practical life. It is more of a socialization process. This process is modified by different Philosophical methods, Principles and Schools of Philosophy. Systematic investigations on how different schools of Philosophy impact on Education tend to be slightly generalized with more emphasis being laid on the educational aspects rather than on how the intrinsic elements of these schools affect Education. This study therefore purposed to examine how the *intrinsics* of the Philosophy of Existentialism shapes Educational Aims, Curriculum, Roles of the teacher and the learner, Teaching methods and learning environment.

1.3. Objectives of study

i. To examine key concepts of Existentialism and their Educational referents

ii. To investigate educational implications o of existentialism

1.4. Method of Study: Analysis

From its Greek etymology, analysis is the breaking down of a complex entity into constituent elements with the aim of unfolding the clarity of its functions and the nature of both the parts and the whole. Philosophical analysis a purely abstract endeavor involving rational investigation as opposed to Empirical procedures. This method fits this study because it is entirely a Philosophical research.

II. KEY CONCEPTS IN EXISTENTIALISM AND THEIR EDUCATIONAL REFERENTS

2.1. Anguish

Anguish, also called Angst, is a theme that transverses the philosophy of existentialism. It has to do with the manner in which to make a choice and the formula for decision making. The process of choice making is full of tension because the question “How do I make a choice?” has no ready made answer and is not predetermined, yet it is important for existentialists because it is in choice that one determines what he/she is. Choice is made in fear and trembling, it is done in some sort of umbra with no foreseeable security. As such it is painful and agonizing to make real good choices because ultimately no one makes choices for another one. Education is a decision Laden activity. Stakeholders make Choices every day. There could be guidelines on how to make relevant choices in a school but that a person makes a choice requires...
the trouble and the anguish of individual decision makers. Learners have to choose what seems good to them: Sometimes they get it right, other times they get it wrong. Policy makers in Education in any given country decide on the best possible practices, the policies are communicated as group decisions or as an Educational commission's decision but in real sense there is nothing like a group's decision. Different individuals communicate their subjective decisions and they finally decide individually to agree on and to implement the best possible decision.

2.2. Responsibility

Simply put, responsibility in this case has to do with making of a choice that is good for the self and for others. In as much as the self chooses in anguish, it also means taking an attitude towards one's choice before and after they are made. Good choices finally help the subject to withstand the power of the absurdity of life. In other words the self is the 'father' of all its actions. Existentialists are thus not an overly irresponsible lot of people. Jean Paul Sartre indicates that individual decisions have appendages towards the decisions of other subjective individuals. The recognition by existentialists that other individuals exist absolves them from solipsism. In School environment, stake holders and individual's decisions often affect the decisions of other. Teachers make decisions that affect students, Students make decisions that affect fellow students and the expectations of teachers and those of parents. Parents make decisions that affect learners... This explains why there are rules and guidelines.... to avoid negative and irresponsible infringement of other subjects.

2.3. Engagement and commitment vs aloofness

Human beings cannot stay aloof from life situations. Our choice should be characterized by commitment. Engagement means deep immersion into real life. Existentialist reject logical and rational formulae for living, for the reason that they obstruct real commitment to life situations which in many cases are absurd. Symptoms of aloofness involve failure to adhere to one's call to educational duty, be they teachers in their pedagogy or learners in the process of formation.

2.4. Absurdity

Absurdity has the connotation of incoherence, contradiction, or meaninglessness. This concept is used by Kierkegaard in the story of biblical Abraham’s sacrifice of his son as an act of faith. It insinuates that faith needs to be leapt into, not to be rationalized. For the wider existentialist community absurdity is what makes life; It is darkness we must leap into (Stroll & Popkin,1965).

III. SIGNIFICANCE OF EXISTENTIALISM TO EDUCATION

3.1. Aims of Education

The primordial aim of existential education is to develop the authentic self of the child. Nietzsche held that the duty of teacher towards students is “to liberate and empower individuals towards authentic, autonomous and creative life” (cited in Aloni, 1989, p.304). Secondly, Existentialism aims at developing unique personality of the child. This is based on the fact that each individual is unique. Consequently, Education must cater for the individual differences. Thirdly Education should develop sense of responsibility in the child; Existential education emphasizes the importance of individual responsibility as there is no escape from it. It is the duty of existentialist teacher to assist the student to assume responsible selfhood and to grow up and face the world responsibly.

Fourthly, Existentialism emphasizes that education should prepare the child to face tragic situations of life. Learners must be made to realize the ‘facticity’ (contingency) of his/her existence and to face the categories of this facticity - dread, anguish, anxiety and fear - resolutely and courageously, and finally to prepare him to meet death with pleasure” (Seetharamu, 1978). The absolute aim of existential education is to inculcate proper attitude towards death. Teachers must make student realize that death is not just negative but it has positive sides also. Education for death can be commutated into an experience of better understanding of good life and one’s obligations in it. Furthermore, Education should help the child to achieve self-realization. Put in other words, “The student should become personally concerned with the realization of his own nature and with what Tillich calls the courage to be himself” (Kneller, 1958, p.66). A learning situation is called for in which the structure and the significance of the self is meaningfully conveyed. In addition it should inculcate choice-making power in students: Education should train men to make better choices and also give the idea that since his choices are never perfect, consequences cannot be predicted. Lastly, education should prepare the child for social adjustment by helping the student to see beyond personal interest and goals. Existentialists argue that social education should teach the learner to respect freedom of all human beings.

3.2. Curriculum

3.2.1. Nature of Existential Curriculum

Existential curriculum is primarily wired to enhance Self realization; its first lesson is Self Examination. It advocates for a liberal curriculum. Such a curriculum lays foundation for human freedom (Power, 1982). Secondly, Curriculum should be dialectical; it should cater for the absurdities and the contradictions thrown to humans by life. It should cater for the immediate and ultimate needs, the good and the bad, life and death, poverty and richness. Thirdly, curriculum should not be fixed since existentialists believe that truth is infinite and un-prescribable (Scotter, 1985). Commutatively, curriculum cannot be prescribed. Curriculum should also be informal, based on self creating subject matter which can be anything that helps the learner to become. Finally, an authentic
curriculum is one chosen by the learner, who himself is an authentic subject (Ozmon & Craver, 1990).

3.2.2. Curriculum Content

Existential curriculum is predominantly humanistic and humanitarian in content. The affinity of Existentialism for humanity is just another way of emphasizing its cardinal precept of producing authentic and unpretentious non robotic humans. Therefore it lays due emphasis on Humanities and other studies that encourage introspection and developing the totality of human beings. According to Taneja (2005), humanities have spiritual powers because they reveal the inner feelings and thoughts like love and hate, and other essential human aspects like relations, morals and aesthetics. The major humanities insisted by existentialism are arts, music, history, literature and Philosophy. The arts reveal the true nature of humans and evoke creativity and imagination, Music is the impetus towards responsiveness. Psychology is a medium for emotional realization, literature is a means to authenticate oneself while history as studied by existentialists is a basis a better modified future.

3.3. Role of the teacher

The task of the teacher is to awaken in students freedom and responsibility. The teacher must recognize that reality is experienced subjectively and that he must then respect and nurture their students’ subjective realities. They can do this by applying two existential principles in their classrooms: Rejoicing in their student’s authenticity and Encouraging their students to have ‘the courage to be’. The teacher must ensure self-realization by helping students to be personally involved in their problems because one cannot realize his ‘self’ without getting things done in their own way. The teacher should help students to be ‘original’ and ‘authentic’ and to make efforts to see the students’ mind having autonomous functioning so that they become free, liberal and self moving. Buber (1947) held that the teacher who nourishes the students’ mind, recognizes it as unique and autonomous. He acts as a helper of each in the inner battle between the actualizing forces and those which oppose them. But he cannot impose on the student the product of his own struggle for actualization. Another task of teacher is to encourage students to work hard and make the best of life, and accept death as something certain. The teacher must encourage their creativity, their discovery, their inventiveness, but should not attempt to direct them or impose his will on them. The responsibility and the duty of the existentialist teacher is very difficult because in his treatment of the ‘other’ he must have to hold his own subjectivity at the same time realizing the subjectivity of the other. According to Jaspers, the only true educator is the one who is permanently engaged in a process of self-education through communication.

3.4. Teacher-Learner Relationship

I-Thou Relationship: Existentialism emphasizes more informal, intimate, lively and personal relations between the teacher and the learner. Formalisms are not only empty but also artificial and robotic. Teachers and learners must be totally free persons. This freedom enables them to achieve dialogue because according to Buber (1970), dialogue should be the main aim of education. He holds that both I-Thou and I-It relations play a role in education but the I-Thou should be the teacher-student relationship. I-Thou is a relation of subject-to-subject. In this kind of relationships, human beings are aware of each other as sharing the unity of being, moreover human beings do not perceive each other as consisting of specific, isolated qualities, but engage in dialogue involving each other’s whole being. The person engaged in I-Thou regards his I as unique- the only member of his class and recognizes the same in the other I, that is, the Thou. It is categorized by mutuality, directness, presentness, intensity and ineffability” (Friedman, 2002, p.65) while the I-It is a relation of subject-object. It is always mediate and indirect and hence is comprehensible and orderable, significant only in connection and not in itself.

Inclusion: Education is the concept of ‘inclusion’, the ability to nurture a dual sensation among those engaged in the dialogue: experiencing oneself and simultaneously perceiving the ‘other’ in singularity. Buber condemns the teacher-centered approach because it gives too much weight to the role of teacher and this makes the development of an I-Thou relation difficult, leading to the I-IT trap where the teacher provides students with facts and information, infuse information into students, but does not encourage creativity. In the same breath, Buber also criticizes the student-centered approach for focusing too much on the role of the student, since this also makes difficult for the I-Thou relation to arise as the student lacks proper guidance from the teacher, the student is left to pump his education out of his own subjective interests or needs within a given environment.

Dialogue: I-Thou relationship and Inclusion are only possible through Dialogue. An educational approach based on dialogue is an approach that places appropriate weight on both the teacher and student’s roles. The relation in education is one of pure dialogue. The dialogue can only come to the force if the student trusts the educator, if the student feels accepted otherwise any attempt to educate will lead to rebellion and lack of interest.

Communion: Education is regarded by the existentialists as the communion between the teacher and learner because the development of the pupil as a person rests on the impact of one human being on another” (Baker,1968). The teacher who interferes, divides the soul into an obedient and rebellious part, but the teacher who has integrity, integrates the pupil through his actions and attitudes. The teacher must be ‘wholly alive and able to communicate himself directly to his fellow beings’, but must do this, as far as possible, without affecting them. He is most effective when he is simply there without any arbitrariness and conscious striving for effectiveness, for then what he is in himself is communicated to his pupils.
Intellectual instruction is only really important when it arises as an expression of a real human existence.

3.5. Teaching Methods

Existentialists advocate for teaching methods that appeal to feelings, emotions, creativity and deeper meaning of life, otherwise called Education for creativity. Such methods must be characterized by individualization ...to promote an I-Thou relationship between the teacher and the learner. Some of the methods suggested by existentialists include but not limited to the Socratic Method of Teaching, also known as the elenches. This method involves systematic Questioning of assumptions followed by further questioning of responses given by a locutor till a state of Truth and self discovery are achieved. It requires one on one, I-Thou situation. It is problem based, and as Karl Jaspers observes University Education should be by nature Socratic (Chukwu, 2011). Another Method advocated by Jean Pal Sartre is Play (Sartre, 1943). Sartre valued essay and play, he himself wrote several essays depicting plays in normal life set up(Kneller, 1964). Lastly the Project method ensures that the learner is hands-on in his studies. It also unleashes the spirit of creativity.

3.6. Learning Environment

Existentialism suggests that schools should be liberal, a free place where learners should be free to choose whatever they want, whenever they want. They have to make choices appropriate to them and not being lumped into a basket of collectiveness, against their desire. Each learner is a Pour soi, a being for itself. They also advocate for diversity and not uniformity. This would include among other things abolishing school uniform because the learner should be free to choose what they to wear.

IV. A CRITIQUE OF EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism has many positive effects on education like humanization, critique of robotization in education, and mitigating dogmatization in educational institutions. However, the individualistic approach in education defeats the purpose of education’s role in proper socialization. The Laissez Faire attitude is likely to lead to less learning and acquisition of half truths which has been precursors of fundamentalism and despair. Its disfavor for the human’s essence leads to disintegrated worldview and some form of ontological egocentrism yet humans are both individuated and universalized beings. Kierkegaard and Sartre thinking differently about the same existentialism are actually doing the universal act of thinking. One can only know good when they have encountered evil and light when they experience darkness. In the same manner we can best know our humanity when we encounter the humans. But when we encounter them we do so objectively, not unless we become them but this not possible. Furthermore, the aims of education are too broad. They are not specified hence difficult for the teacher to evaluate learners. Excess freedom placed upon learners may be counterproductive and may create a state of anarchy where everybody believes he is right. Finally it forgets about the role of the society and in some cases it is against any codes of rules and regulations that bring people together.

V. CONCLUSION

Existentialism, as has been observed, is an anthropocentric Philosophy. Its centre of focus is humanity - which it views as a complex whole that is basically inward- outward oriented. Reality of subjective human experiences is Sacrosanct, and being such, it dictates the conception of all there is. Education in the hands of existentialists is a process at the service of the unfolding and enfolding the real self (Le Poursoi). The true self is a totally free entity, it is a project that makes itself, the way it wishes using daily responsible choices and actions. However, as Aristotle puts in his Nicomachean Ethics, virtues lies in the middle; meaning that excesses, including holding existentialism radically can lead to more problems, as indicated in critique section.

REFERENCES


