

The Philosophical Foundations of Early Childhood Education in the Nigerian Context

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Abstract

This study explores the philosophical foundations of early childhood education (ECE) in Nigeria by examining the interplay of indigenous African thought, Western educational theories, and religious values. It investigates how these diverse influences shape curriculum design, teaching practices, and policy directions. The research highlights the importance of integrating indigenous values like communalism and moral education with Western pedagogical models and religious teachings from Christianity and Islam. It also discusses emerging contemporary trends such as critical pedagogy and multiculturalism. The study concludes with recommendations for developing a harmonized, contextually grounded ECE framework that supports holistic child development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Philosophical Foundations, Indigenous African Philosophy

Introduction

Early childhood education represents the foundational stage in the lifelong process of learning. It is during this period that children begin to form their basic understanding of themselves, others, and the world around them. In Nigeria, early childhood education plays a critical role in shaping the cognitive, emotional, social, and moral development of young learners. However, beyond its pedagogical and developmental importance lies a deeper philosophical foundation that informs the goals, methods, and values of early education within the Nigerian context. Understanding the philosophical underpinnings of early childhood education in Nigeria requires a reflection on both indigenous and Western educational philosophies that have influenced the system. These philosophical ideas shape perceptions about the nature of the child, the purpose of education, the role of the teacher, and the values that should be transmitted to younger generations. In the Nigerian context, where diverse cultures, languages, and belief systems coexist, the philosophical foundations of education must consider both traditional African worldviews and the impact of colonial and post-colonial educational models.

Early childhood education (ECE) is globally recognized as a foundational stage in a child's cognitive and social development. It encompasses the formal and informal teaching and learning provided to children from birth to age five, laying the groundwork for future learning and behavior (UNESCO, 2021). In Nigeria, ECE is acknowledged as a crucial component of the education system, as articulated in the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2014), which states that "care, protection, stimulation, and learning promoted in children from age 0–5 in a variety of settings" is the definition of early childhood care and education. Despite its acknowledged importance, the philosophical foundations guiding ECE in the Nigerian context remain insufficiently explored, particularly from an indigenous perspective (Adebiyi & Salawu, 2020).

Philosophy serves as the bedrock of educational theory and practice. It shapes what we teach, how we teach, and the values we instill in learners. The philosophical underpinning of any education system offers insight into its objectives, content, and methodology (Akinpelu, 1981; Eze & Igwe, 2019). In Nigeria, the educational framework for early childhood has evolved through a confluence of indigenous African traditions, colonial legacies, religious values, and contemporary global educational trends. Each of these components presents distinct, and sometimes conflicting, philosophical orientations that continue to influence policy and practice in early childhood settings (Obi & Nwafor, 2017).

Indigenous Nigerian educational philosophies place a strong emphasis on character development, social responsibility, and respect for elders. They are based on oral traditions, communal values, and holistic development (Fafunwa, 1974; Ogunyemi, 2021). Usually, storytelling, music, play, and apprenticeship are used to impart these values; these approaches fit in nicely with developmental theories that support experiential learning. However, as Western models of formal education, which placed an emphasis on individualism and cognitive outcomes, took over, many of these indigenous teaching methods were marginalized during and after colonial rule (Taiwo, 1980; Okonkwo & Adedokun, 2018). Because of this, ECE in Nigeria frequently veers between traditional and imported models in terms of philosophy, which results in inconsistent practice. (Ekanem & Ekefre, 2014).

Formal early education in Nigeria was influenced by Western philosophy, especially the writings of Rousseau, Dewey, Montessori, and Piaget. These ideas included child-centeredness, learning through play, and developmental appropriateness (Dewey, 1938; Montessori, 1967; Piaget, 1952; Rousseau, 1762). These ideas have inspired educational reforms and pedagogical strategies in urban preschools, especially private ones (Yusuf & Adeoye, 2019). However, these theories have frequently failed to address the socio-cultural realities of the typical Nigerian child due to a lack of contextual adaptation (Onukaogu & Adediran, 2022). Therefore, for meaningful educational transformation, a critical analysis of how these philosophies fit or clash with Nigerian contexts is required.

Religious philosophies also play a crucial role in shaping early childhood education in Nigeria. Islamic and Christian teachings significantly influence moral education and parental expectations in various regions (White, 1903; Al-Ghazali, 1953). These traditions emphasize obedience, piety, and social harmony, which are often reflected in school curricula and disciplinary approaches (Kukoyi & Olaleye, 2016). In many cases, religious institutions provide early childhood education services, further embedding religious worldviews into educational structures. However, the blending of religious, traditional, and secular ideologies raises questions about the coherence and direction of Nigeria's ECE framework (Ige, 2021).

Given these multiple influences, this paper seeks to explore the philosophical foundations of early childhood education in Nigeria by analyzing how indigenous African philosophies, Western educational theories, and religious worldviews converge or diverge. By identifying and critically evaluating these philosophical roots, the paper aims to provide a coherent foundation upon which early childhood educational policy and practice in Nigeria can be improved. In doing so, it contributes to the larger discourse on decolonizing education and making it more culturally relevant and philosophically grounded (Ukeje & Okoli, 2023).

Indigenous African Philosophical Foundations

Indigenous African philosophy is deeply embedded in the cultural, moral, and social fabric of Nigerian societies. It provides a holistic view of education that transcends cognitive development to include emotional, moral, spiritual, and communal growth (Ogunyemi, 2021). In traditional Nigerian communities, early childhood education was not confined to formal institutions; rather, it occurred within the home, the community, and through everyday social interactions. This education was practical, rooted in the lived experiences of the people, and aimed at preparing the child to be a responsible and contributing member of the society (Fafunwa, 1974; Adebisi & Salawu, 2020).

A central tenet of indigenous African philosophy is communalism – the belief that the child belongs not only to their biological parents but also to the extended family and the wider community. This worldview informs the saying, “It takes a village to raise a child.” Through communal practices such as shared caregiving, storytelling, folktales, proverbs, and rituals, children are introduced to social norms and moral values from an early age (Eze & Igwe, 2019). These informal yet structured practices foster early socialization, cooperation, respect for authority, and accountability within the community (Mbiti, 1969; Ukeje & Okoli, 2023).

Another key feature of indigenous education is its experiential and participatory nature. Learning is not abstract but rather grounded in real-life experiences. Young children learn through observation, imitation, and hands-on participation in daily chores, farming, traditional crafts, and ceremonies. These activities are designed to instill not only practical skills but also discipline, patience, and a sense of purpose (Obi & Nwafor, 2017; Ogunyemi, 2021). Unlike Western educational systems that often separate play from learning, indigenous philosophies see play as integral to education, where rhythm, dance, and dramatization serve as both entertainment and instruction (Yusuf & Adeoye, 2019).

Moral education is another critical dimension of indigenous African philosophy. Character formation is prioritized over academic knowledge. Children are consistently taught values such as honesty, hospitality, courage, humility, and justice through culturally embedded tools like proverbs, riddles, songs, and moral tales (Ekanem & Ekefre, 2014). Moral transgressions are corrected communally, and virtues are reinforced through praise, storytelling, and role modeling. These values serve as the foundation for societal cohesion and responsible citizenship, which are vital goals of early childhood education.

Despite the richness of these indigenous foundations, modern Nigerian ECE has often failed to integrate them meaningfully into formal curricula. The dominance of Western pedagogical models, introduced during and after colonization, has contributed to a gradual erosion of traditional values and learning methods (Okonkwo & Adedokun, 2018). However, there is a renewed scholarly and policy interest in revalorizing indigenous knowledge systems as a way to decolonize education and ensure cultural relevance (Ukeje & Okoli, 2023; Ogunyemi, 2021). Recognizing and

incorporating indigenous African philosophical principles into ECE can lead to more contextually appropriate and holistic educational experiences for Nigerian children.

Western Philosophical Influences on Early Childhood Education in Nigeria

Western philosophical traditions have significantly influenced the structure, content, and pedagogy of early childhood education (ECE) in Nigeria. These influences began during colonial rule and have persisted into the post-colonial era, shaping teacher training, curriculum design, and classroom practices (Okonkwo & Adedokun, 2018). Central to these Western influences are philosophical ideas rooted in progressivism, constructivism, **and** empiricism, which emphasize rational inquiry, individual learning, and developmental psychology. However, while these ideas have enriched Nigerian ECE, they have also introduced challenges, particularly when they are applied without sufficient adaptation to the local socio-cultural context (Yusuf & Adeoye, 2019; Onukaogu & Adediran, 2022).

One of the most prominent figures in Western educational philosophy is *John Dewey*, whose theory of experiential learning and child-centered education has shaped early learning globally. Dewey emphasized the importance of learning by doing, promoting environments where children actively engage with materials, peers, and real-life contexts to construct knowledge (Dewey, 1938). In Nigeria, many private early childhood institutions have embraced Deweyan approaches, favoring inquiry-based and play-based learning methods over rote memorization. However, such practices are more prevalent in urban schools with better resources, while public and rural schools often lack the infrastructure to implement these pedagogical shifts effectively (Adebiyi & Salawu, 2020).

Similarly, *Jean Piaget's* stages of cognitive development have profoundly impacted how educators understand the mental capacities of young learners. Piaget's constructivist framework encourages teachers to design activities appropriate to children's developmental stages, particularly emphasizing sensorimotor and preoperational thinking in early childhood (Piaget, 1952). Nigerian teacher education curricula frequently reference Piaget's work to promote age-appropriate instructional practices. However, critics argue that Piaget's theories, developed in Western contexts, may not fully account for the accelerated social responsibilities and cognitive exposure experienced by many African children in communal settings (Ukeje & Okoli, 2023; Ogunyemi, 2021).

Maria Montessori's philosophy has also gained a foothold in Nigerian ECE, particularly among private schools. Montessori's method stresses independence, sensory-based learning, and the prepared environment, where children are guided rather than instructed (Montessori, 1967). Many Nigerian Montessori schools incorporate self-correcting materials and mixed-age classrooms. However, concerns have been raised about the commercialization of Montessori education in Nigeria, where institutions often use the "Montessori" label without adhering to its philosophical underpinnings (Eze & Igwe, 2019). Furthermore, critics question the extent to which Montessori's ideals of individualism align with the communal values intrinsic to Nigerian indigenous education.

While these Western philosophies have introduced progressive pedagogical concepts, they are often implemented in Nigeria without sufficient contextual adaptation. Scholars argue that without integrating local cultural realities, these imported ideas risk being pedagogically ineffective or culturally alienating (Obi & Nwafor, 2017; Ogunyemi, 2021). Therefore, for early childhood education in Nigeria to be truly effective, it must synthesize the valuable aspects of Western

philosophies with indigenous epistemologies. Such a hybrid approach would not only enhance learning outcomes but also preserve cultural identity and relevance in early learning environments.

Religious and Philosophical Foundations of Early Childhood Education

Religion and philosophy are deeply interwoven into the social and cultural fabric of Nigerian society, and they significantly shape early childhood education (ECE). In Nigeria, where Islam, Christianity and indigenous African religions coexist, and parenting practices, moral education, and expectations for young children are greatly influenced by religious convictions and philosophical ideals. A value-based educational system that prioritizes morality, deference to elders, collective responsibility, and the cultivation of a child's spiritual identity is shaped in part by these religious traditions (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2020; Akinwale, 2022).

Christian philosophical standpoint, views childhood education as a divine responsibility and a moral obligation. Christian doctrine encourages the training of children "in the way they should go" (Proverbs 22:6), placing emphasis on virtues such as honesty, obedience, and love. Many mission schools across Nigeria, especially those established by colonial-era missionaries, still uphold Christian educational principles by integrating Bible studies, moral education, and prayer into the daily routine (Ogunyemi, 2021). This faith-based approach is designed to develop not only academic skills but also character and spiritual awareness from a young age (Iroegbu, 2023). Such practices reflect the broader philosophical view that education should foster holistic development—spiritual, moral, intellectual, and emotional.

Similarly, Islamic education plays a vital role in shaping early learning, particularly in the northern regions of Nigeria. Islamic philosophy emphasizes the pursuit of knowledge as a religious duty and promotes early memorization of the Qur'an, moral discipline, and obedience to Allah's commands. The integration of Qur'anic schools (makaranta or Islamiyyah) within ECE structures demonstrates how deeply religious ideals are embedded in educational practices. These institutions often blend Arabic literacy, moral training, and general education, fostering both spiritual development and academic foundation (Ahmed & Ibrahim, 2022; Nasir & Yusuf, 2023). The Islamic educational philosophy also aligns with the communal and holistic approach, stressing the interconnection between religious belief, social ethics, and educational development.

Indigenous African religions and their associated philosophies also contribute significantly to the religious foundation of ECE in Nigeria. These belief systems, rooted in ancestral reverence and spiritual interconnectedness, promote education as a sacred duty and a communal endeavor. Religious rituals, folktales, proverbs, and traditional festivals serve as informal but powerful educational tools that transmit values, moral lessons, and a deep respect for life and the cosmos (Ekanem & Ekefre, 2014; Ukeje & Okoli, 2023). The philosophical underpinnings of these traditions align closely with African humanism, where the community is central to the child's growth and the ultimate goal of education is to cultivate responsible and morally upright individuals.

In addition to religious traditions, philosophical ideologies such as idealism, realism, and existentialism have influenced Nigeria's approach to early childhood education. Idealism, with its emphasis on the development of the mind and character, aligns with the religious pursuit of virtue and moral perfection. In contrast, realism focuses on preparing the child for the physical world through empirical knowledge and sensory experience, which complements the scientific aspects of modern curricula. Existentialist principles, which prioritize personal choice and individual

experience, are increasingly visible in urban private schools that promote inquiry, creativity, and learner autonomy (Obi & Nwafor, 2017; Onukaogu & Adediran, 2022).

Importantly, Nigeria's national education policies also reflect a synthesis of religious and philosophical values. The National Policy on Education (FRN 2013) acknowledges the role of religion in value transmission and promotes the integration of religious instruction and moral education at the foundational level. This policy direction reflects an understanding that early childhood education in Nigeria is not merely about academic achievement but also about identity formation, moral uprightness, and cultural continuity (FRN 2013; Ogunyemi, 2021). Thus, to be effective and culturally responsive, ECE in Nigeria must continue to engage with the diverse religious and philosophical traditions that inform its practices.

Contemporary Philosophical Trends and Challenges

The landscape of early childhood education (ECE) in Nigeria is increasingly being shaped by contemporary philosophical trends that seek to address the complexities of a modernizing and pluralistic society. These trends reflect global influences, technological advancement, and a growing emphasis on inclusive and equitable education. Among the most influential philosophical paradigms in recent years are critical pedagogy, postmodernism, multiculturalism, and global citizenship education. While these trends aim to transform ECE in progressive ways, their implementation in the Nigerian context is met with several challenges, including cultural misalignment, infrastructural deficiencies, and policy gaps (Ogunyemi, 2021; Iroegbu, 2023).

Critical pedagogy, inspired by Paulo Freire, challenges the traditional top-down model of education and promotes a dialogical and emancipatory approach. In Nigerian ECE, critical pedagogy has encouraged educators to view children not as passive recipients but as active participants in their own learning processes. It promotes classroom practices that question societal inequalities and cultivate critical thinking from an early age (Freire, 1970; Onukaogu & Adediran, 2022). However, in many Nigerian early childhood settings, particularly in rural and low-income communities, rote learning and authoritarian teaching styles persist due to limited teacher training and ingrained cultural practices that discourage questioning authority (Ahmed & Ibrahim, 2022). Postmodernist philosophy contributes to early childhood education by deconstructing the notion of a fixed childhood experience and emphasizing the diversity of children's voices, backgrounds, and identities. It critiques universal developmental theories and advocates for localized, contextual understandings of childhood (MacNaughton, 2005). In Nigeria, where cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity is vast, postmodernism offers an important lens for tailoring education to varied experiences. Yet, implementing this approach remains challenging due to standardized curricula that often ignore local realities, as well as assessment systems that prioritize uniformity over individual learning trajectories (Ukeje & Okoli, 2023; Yusuf & Adeoye, 2019).

Multiculturalism is another significant philosophical trend in contemporary ECE, especially relevant in Nigeria's multi-ethnic society. This philosophy promotes the inclusion of diverse cultural perspectives in educational content, materials, and teaching practices. It encourages children to develop respect and empathy for people from different backgrounds and helps preserve indigenous knowledge systems (Ekanem & Ekefre, 2014; Ogunyemi, 2021). Despite its potential, multicultural education in Nigeria often lacks effective implementation due to the dominance of Western curricula and the marginalization of local languages and cultures in early childhood programs (Adebisi & Salawu, 2020).

Global citizenship education (GCE) is an emerging philosophical orientation that prepares young learners to engage with global challenges such as sustainability, peace, and human rights. Although still relatively new in Nigerian early education policy, aspects of GCE are being introduced through international development programs and some private school initiatives. GCE emphasizes interconnectedness, critical thinking, and collaborative problem-solving—skills that are increasingly essential in a globalized world (UNESCO, 2022). However, critics warn that GCE, when uncritically imported, can conflict with national priorities and may inadvertently reinforce cultural homogenization (Nasir & Yusuf, 2023).

Amidst these philosophical innovations, Nigeria's ECE system continues to grapple with significant challenges. These include inadequate teacher preparation, insufficient infrastructure, policy inconsistency, and cultural resistance to some modern pedagogies. Teacher education programs are often outdated and fail to integrate contemporary philosophical frameworks, limiting educators' capacity to apply reflective and inclusive teaching practices (Onukaogu & Adediran, 2022). Additionally, many ECE centers lack the basic facilities needed to support active and exploratory learning environments. Cultural expectations also influence parental and community attitudes, sometimes discouraging child-centered methods perceived as too liberal or foreign (Akinwale, 2022).

To move forward, there is a need for philosophical synthesis – an approach that harmonizes global philosophical innovations with Nigeria's indigenous educational values and realities. This would involve reforming teacher education, decolonizing the curriculum, investing in infrastructure, and fostering public awareness about the holistic goals of ECE. Only through a balanced and context-sensitive philosophy of education can Nigeria ensure that early childhood programs truly empower learners and reflect the diverse identities and aspirations of its people (Ukeje & Okoli, 2023).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The philosophical foundations of early childhood education in Nigeria are rich and multifaceted, drawing from indigenous African worldviews, religious doctrines, and Western educational theories. These diverse philosophical strands collectively shape the values, aims, and pedagogical practices within early learning environments. Indigenous philosophies emphasize communal living, moral development, and experiential learning, while religious influences promote spiritual and ethical upbringing from an early age. Western philosophies have introduced modern pedagogical approaches that stress child-centered learning, critical thinking, and developmental appropriateness.

However, the integration of these philosophies faces several challenges, including infrastructural deficits, outdated teacher training, policy inconsistencies, and cultural resistance to change. Contemporary philosophical trends such as critical pedagogy, postmodernism, and multiculturalism offer valuable tools for reforming early childhood education, but their effective application requires a context-sensitive and culturally relevant approach. To ensure a sustainable and inclusive early childhood education system, Nigeria must adopt a philosophically reflective stance that harmonizes traditional values with modern educational demands. This approach will not only enhance the quality of education but also foster the holistic development of children as morally grounded, intellectually curious, and socially responsible individuals.

Based on the conclusion, the paper recommends the following:

1. *Promote Philosophical Synthesis in Policy Formulation*

The Federal Ministry of Education should encourage a balanced integration of religious, indigenous, and global educational philosophies in policy design. This harmonization will ensure that early childhood programs reflect Nigeria's diverse socio-cultural landscape while aligning with global best practices.

2. Enhance Parental and Community Involvement

Parents and community leaders should be actively involved in the design and implementation of early childhood education programs. Community engagement fosters a shared philosophical vision for child development and helps bridge the gap between home values and school expectations.

3. Adopt Child-Centered and Inclusive Pedagogies

Schools should adopt teaching methods that respect the child's voice, creativity, and individual learning pace. Inspired by postmodern and critical pedagogies, these approaches promote critical thinking, inclusivity, and active participation, which are crucial for nurturing well-rounded individuals.

4. Invest in Infrastructure and Learning Resources

To effectively implement any philosophical model of early childhood education, there must be adequate investment in infrastructure, teaching materials, and learning environments. Government and private stakeholders should prioritize the provision of safe, stimulating, and culturally responsive educational spaces.

5. Encourage Research and Continuous Philosophical Dialogue

Academic institutions and research centers should promote ongoing research into the evolving philosophical foundations of early childhood education in Nigeria. This will support evidence-based reforms and ensure the educational system remains responsive to contemporary needs and cultural shifts.

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