

FREEDOM AND DEMOCRATIC CLASSROOM IN IMO STATE SECONDARY SCHOOLS: A PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

The study examined freedom and democratic classroom in Imo State secondary schools: A Philosophical Approach. Three research objectives and questions were formulated to guide the study with an adoption of a philosophical approach and the utilization of speculative, prescriptive (also normative) and analytic modes of philosophy in the analysis of data; aimed at explaining clearly freedom and democratic classroom for simple application. As a democratic leader, the teacher provides students with appropriate opportunities to contribute to group decisions. These opportunities range from procedural to educational matters. In the democratic classroom, for instance, the teacher can involve students in devising classroom rules, perhaps in the form of writing and signing a classroom constitution which go a long way to improve their academic performance. It was argued that teachers are social change agents. They can play key roles in shaping and reshaping the society on democratic grounds. The study concluded that the practice of democratic classroom provides the students an opportunity to understand and analyze the interplay of social development, education and democracy and develop skills and commitments for serving and improving the society. Therefore, training is very vital for teachers to achieve the needed practice of democratic classroom. The researchers therefore recommended that the practice of democratic classroom be made mandatory among secondary school teachers, in order to give the students a sense of belonging. Also, teachers' training and re-training should be made compulsory to enable teachers possess the needed skills in the practice of freedom and democratic classroom. Students should be allowed to share their opinions, ask questions when necessary and make valid contributions, as these can aid in improving their academic performance.

Keywords: Freedom, Democracy, Social Skills, Academic Performance, Education, Improvement.

Introduction

That education should be democratic, especially in classroom settings, in a democratic State is axiomatic since it should be undisputable for everyone living in a democratic state. However, it is not very clear as to what democratic education precisely means. Some people have seen democracy being a qualifying adjective for education in a democratic country while others believe it has to do with the way and manner in which educational issues are carried out. Since there are many definitions for democracy, there are also many definitions for democratic education. The most popular and probably the commonest definition of democracy in modern times is the Abraham Lincoln's (the 16th President of the United States of America)

which definition of democracy as ‘the government of the people by the people for the people’. Then, democratic education could be the education offered through a democratic process to create a democratic society and people who are democratically minded.

Ajayi (1983) suggested that the economic system of a community or nation should be democratically distributed and organized to have a democratic education, where schools are made democratic by giving the head teachers, teachers, supportive staff, students, and other stakeholders a say in the running of their institutions. Orji (2002: 298) defined ‘democracy as a phenomenon that deals with man’s effort to transcend himself and reach his ideal’. It underscores the point that democracy and education are intricately tied - no democracy, no democratic education. He went further to say that democracy would basically mean a government in which all the citizens participate in governance as opposed to oligarchy or monarchy. This would imply that democratic education would be an educational system in which everybody that is involved participates in the governance of education.

Education, in the world over, aims at promoting the intellectual development of the learner by widening his boundaries of knowledge (Gerstmann & Streb, 2006). This can best be achieved in an environment of disciplined inquiry, characterized by an atmosphere that allows for free and close interaction between the learner and his teachers and colleagues. This depicts a conducive classroom atmosphere that engenders effective teaching and learning (Bottery, 1993; Moswela, 2010). Embedded in such environments are rules and regulations, procedures, and policies usually backed by enacted laws referred to in the school system as Education Laws.

On the other hand, academic freedom is actually related to higher education in terms of autonomy. Since the university system which is regarded as a community of its own is a place where scholars are to pursue truth, formulate and transmit it to students, who at the same time learn to search for truth for themselves, an idea developed right from the middle ages that such organizations should be autonomous. Thereafter, a concept that scholars should be free to learn and to teach what they please freely followed. This is usually seen as the philosophy of intellectual freedom which originated from Greece. Going by these, academic freedom means the right to design and teach courses, conduct researches, hold ideas, associate with others, challenge established orthodoxies, and other activities without fear of harassment or victimization, all in the pursuit of truth (Agh & Egumu, 2007). Traditionally academic freedom refers to the liberty of the person to carry out investigation in a scholarly manner within the structure of the academic community. It is narrowly defined as “the freedom of professionally qualified persons to inquire, discover, publish and teach the truth as they see it in the field of their competence, without any control of any authority except the control of the authority of the rational methods by which truth is established” (Worgul, 1992, p51). It is this definition that serves as a model for much of the discussion in this paper. When considered this way the process includes; the unhindered freedom to explore a given subject to the extent that the rational powers of investigation are capable and the freedom to do so without influence or pressures to external process. There is always development of thoughts or divergent views on a given subject in dialogue, discussion and even disagreement.

Classroom is a place where academic and social interaction takes place. It is a place where teacher and student interact and influence each other (Ahmad, John & Bryan, 2014). As a result, students get guidance and education. Most specifically, it is a place which is characterized by students who come from different social-economic backgrounds, cultures and geographical locations (Bryan & Hayes, 2010). This diversity creates an ample opportunity for them to share their own experiences as well as get knowledge about other different cultures, ways of life and people (Tammi, 2013). In celebrating diversity and bringing together groups of diverse view into the classroom, which is democratic classroom, Greene (1995) suggested that the teacher should stimulate young person’s to reach beyond themselves, create meanings by looking through the wider and more informed perspectives of lives. The teacher should question the child in involving him \ her into critical thinking and attentively engage him \ her with activities. She uses Dewey as

her yardstick in his democratic education to freeing the child to make a meaning of his \ her learning. Dewey claimed that democracy and education should go hand in hand. Democratic society and democratic education are participatory and emergent. Dewey viewed the school as a miniature democratic society in which students could learn and practice the skills and the tools necessary for democratic living (Dewey, 1916). The young should be allowed to identify alternative possibilities and choose what they think is possible. This might help them learn on their own initiative and investigate the world. Freedom is an achievement in the midst of life and with other human beings. People achieve whatever freedom they can achieve through increasing consciousness and mindful transaction with what surrounds them and not by breaking out of context and acting in response to impulse or desire (Greene, 1995). People often act when they realize that they have the power to change their situation and make a meaning of their world. It becomes therefore important to study democratic classroom in secondary schools, as this can possibly provide opportunity for young teenagers to express their view by time.

Statement of the Problem

The idea of democratic classroom existed since 19th century. Studies have shown that the socialization of young people is connected with the concept of social freedom and academic empowerment. Schools may provide the best practical ground for this purpose. There is a general belief that schools provide civic training to students where they find an opportunity for open discussion and participation in real educative activities (Pohan, 2003). Some studies have reported that when teachers encourage open discussion in the classroom, students learn many social skills such as respect, care, raising hands for permission to share views and even actively participate in all activities in school, such as sporting activity. Furthermore, in Imo state, interviews granted by some students revealed that they are not always allowed to say much as a way of contribution, while in class. Especially, as it has to do with what the teacher is teaching at the moment.

Democratic classroom interaction consists of active participation of students in their own learning, showing cooperation, respect and recognition of others contributions. Apart from providing active learning opportunities, democratic classroom also enhances civic knowledge, participation and citizenship. The understanding of Dewey about the concept of democracy as a way of life in a classroom is essential to not only understands the role of democratic classroom but also of teachers in social skills development of students, improvement in their academic performance, as well as improve on their confidence. Dewey further argued that teachers are social change agents. They can play a key role in shaping and reshaping the society on democratic grounds. Classroom can be seen as a microcosm of the wider society (Burk & Fry, 1997). The willingness to express one's thoughts is important for becoming active and participative citizens. In a democratic classroom, students are encouraged to share their views with others. This seems to be lacking in our secondary schools, where the teacher is always right and have the final say. It is against this bedrock that the researchers attempt to study freedom and democratic classroom, as it affects the general wellbeing of the students.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to investigate freedom and democratic classroom in Imo State Secondary schools, using philosophical approach. Specifically, the study will be designed to:

- i. Examine the influence of freedom and democratic classroom on social skills development of students in Imo State.
- ii. Find out the ways freedom and democratic classroom education could be harnessed for secondary school improvement in Imo State.
- iii. Ascertain how freedom and democratic classroom could improve the academic performance of secondary school students in Imo State.

Research Questions

The following research questions are formulated to guide the study;

- i. How does freedom and democratic classroom enhance social skills development of secondary school students in Imo State?
- ii. In what ways could freedom and democratic classroom be harnessed for the improvement of secondary schools in Imo State?
- iii. In what ways could freedom and democratic classroom improve the academic performance of secondary school students in Imo State?

Method

The study adopted a philosophical research design. Method of data collection included textbooks, records, journals and materials gotten from the internet. In the method of data analysis speculative, prescriptive (also normative) and analytic modes of philosophy were applied in analysing the data which was aimed at explaining clearly freedom and democratic classroom in a philosophical approach, for simple application.

Results and Discussion

Research Question One: How does freedom and democratic classroom enhance social skills development of secondary school students in Imo State?

A Philosopher by name John Dewey believed that a democratic society must be mobile and dynamic; it is a society in which teachers know that what works for one student might not work for another. He believed that experience is not a mental state that is within us; instead, we are within experience. For Dewey, a democratic society is not one that makes provisions for equal participation in its good for all its members. This kind of society involves flexible readjustments of its institutions through interactions among the different forms of life (Boisvert, 1988; Campbell, 1995; Gouinlock, 1972; Sleeper, 1987; Welchman, 1995).

Democratic classroom emerges from the principles and practices of democracy and how it applies to classroom life. Basically, the aim is to inform the teaching and learning to create a diverse and equitable learning community in the classroom (Trafford, 2008). The educational community and society have differing views about the purpose and aim of education in a democracy society (Morcom & MacCallum, 2012). The practice of democracy in classroom differs from context to context. People have different beliefs and views about the democracy in education (Goldstein & Brooks, 2007). Some believe that democracy is associated with the notions of liberal freedom and liberty, while others equate democracy with equality of opportunity. Some argue that social change occurs through free market practices (Davis, 2010; Narvaez, 2010).

Research has established that democratic classroom can create effective citizens by providing the students an opportunity to understand and analyze the interplay of social development, education and democracy and develop skills and commitments for serving and improving the society (Epstein & Oyler, 2008). The interactions and experiences within a classroom environment lay the foundation for the development for socially useful citizens for future (Ponder & Lewis-Ferrell, 2009). Researchers argued that all students have the right to grow socially in a truly democratic classroom. They should not come just for learning. The original aim of education is to take the students beyond the classroom borders into the life and community as active citizens. They should find an opportunity to learn and practice along with an active exercise of culture, language and social ethics. This will help them to explore their own individual freedom and autonomy (Dimick, 2012).

Research Question Two: In what ways could freedom and democratic classroom be harnessed for the improvement of secondary schools in Imo State?

Education is a good way of life through which the transmission of culture occurs. People seek new ways to express themselves in natural development and growth. Education is beneficial for individuals who are in need of change, and change is good for people who can direct its course. People need knowledge,

intentions, intelligence, and good will to turn this change into their advantage. Progressive education in a democratic society is about change in thoughts, feelings, and internal constraints (Eldridge, 1998; Rockefeller, 1991).

Democratic education plays a vital role in creating awareness about democracy therefore it should be open for all citizens of a democratic society. Apart from being open to everyone it is essential for a democratic education to make maximum efforts for providing best education to children. It helps to build healthy relationship between teacher and student (SIDA, 2001). An education system with democratic education should help increase freedom as power to select and in achieving satisfactory life. It should also encourage the intensification of individuality.

The teachers have to create an environment that would allow creative thinking on the part of the students. They should see that this is possible in the classroom. It is their responsibilities to inculcate in their students the value of freedom and the worth of other individuals. They should make the school where the communities can draw together for the purpose of creating a common life and opening up new avenues for growth. Students must be encouraged to learn to judge people and ideas not by their labels but by their fruits. They must also learn that a democratic attitude towards minority groups will often involve unpopular decisions, such as giving them a voice to say their point of view. Greene (1995) called for teachers to include the voices of those “long silenced” to “make way for the untried and unexpected” (p. 136). While the main point of education as she sees it, “is to enable a human being to become increasingly mindful with regard to his or her situation and its untapped possibilities”(p.182), She also sees the school as one of the few public spaces still available for the creation of a pluralistic community. Only in such communities she believed, can we hope to achieve the kind of improvement needed in schools. Greene was interested in creating the kinds of schools in which people listen to one another. This can also be applicable to public secondary schools in Imo State because, when students exercise freedom by been allowed to make valid contributions, they will develop confidence in themselves and what they do. This will result in improvement of educational system.

Research Question Three: In what ways could freedom and democratic classroom improve the academic performance of secondary school students in Imo State?

Educational institutions are mandated to use education as a tool for social and economic transformation. The success of a school is measured by the quality of students it produces. The success of any educational institution is measured by the performance of its students in both academic and non-academic tests. This is supported by Yusuf (2008) when contending that the performance should not only be based in terms of test and examination results and student ability to apply what is learnt and the rate at which students move on to higher institution of learning, but should include other areas such as whether the students have acquired the survival skills. Despite that, the use of students’ achievement in academic work to assess the teacher’s effectiveness has gained ground. It is noteworthy, that allowing students share their opinions, ask questions when necessary and make valid contributions can improve their academic performance. This can only be exercised in a democratic classroom setting. Research has indicated that school leadership, teacher’s quality, parental support and students are detrimental to students’ high or low academic performance (MacNeil&Maclin, 2005). But, there seems to be not much emphasis on how freedom and democratic classroom can foster academic performance of students.

Democratic schools, like democracy itself, do not happen by chance. They result from explicit attempts by educators to put in place arrangements and opportunities that will bring democracy to life. For this reason, democratic schools are marked by widespread participation in issues of governance and policy making. Committees, councils, and other school wide decision-making groups include not only professional educators, but also young people, their parents, and other members of the school community. In classrooms, young people and teachers engage in collaborative planning, reaching decisions that respond to the concerns, aspirations, and interests of both. This kind of democratic planning, at both the school and the classroom

levels, is not the "engineering of consent" toward predetermined decisions that has too often created the illusion of democracy, but a genuine attempt to honour the right of people to participate in making decisions that affect their lives.

Teachers for years have been regarded as the essential catalysts for school improvement and school development. They are the driving force and main resource in the development and academic growth of students as they are sources of knowledge and agents of change (Wallace, 2011). Teacher effectiveness has been the interest of policy makers, educators and parents. The effectiveness is measured by students' academic performance in both internal and external examination. It is a general feeling that students who fail the examinations are taught by ineffective teachers; on the other hand those who excel are taught by the very effective teachers. Research so far has shown that a teacher's effectiveness has an influence on the students' academic attainment (Afe, 2001). Logically it is so because teachers are the facilitators in the teaching and learning process, so their practice of democratic classroom enhances it. They interpret the subject matter and put theory into practice during their interaction with the students. The teacher is "increasingly becoming the focus of interest because of the key role that he or she plays in the delivery of quality education to the learner" (Taal, 1996, p.16). Also, teachers use several techniques such as operating in a democratic setting to assist students improve their academic achievement. They evaluate, assess and provide for students with special needs. Teachers are evaluators at classroom level for quality standard. They attend to students work during lessons, provide tutorials, mark students' homework and give feedback. If a disability is identified in a student, a teacher will work around the clock to assist the child to build confidence and recommend a remedy. This builds students competence and their academic performance improves. Therefore, there is no doubt that the full practice of freedom and democratic classroom will foster the academic excellence of secondary students in Imo State.

Conclusion

As a result of the findings of the study, it is concluded that the practice of democratic classroom provides the students an opportunity to understand and analyze the interplay of social development, education and democracy, and to develop skills and commitments for serving and improving the society. Also, democratic education is very essential as it makes maximum efforts for providing best education to children and to build healthy relationship between teacher and student, thereby improving on the standard of education. Furthermore, it is the training of teachers that foster the practice of democratic classroom in schools. Therefore, training is very vital for teachers to achieve the needed practice of democratic classroom.

Recommendations

- i. The practice of democratic classroom should be made mandatory among secondary school teachers, in order to give the students a sense of belonging.
- ii. Teachers training and re-training should be made compulsory by ministry of education. This is to enable teachers possess the needed skill in the practice of freedom and democratic classroom.
- iii. In order to improve secondary school education and enhance student's personnel administration in Imo State Secondary schools, there is need for students to develop socially and skillfully by interacting with teachers during lessons.
- iv. Students should be allowed to share their opinions, ask questions when necessary and make valid contributions, as these can aid in improving their academic performance.

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