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Philosophy of Tabula Rasa Theory and Education of a Typical African Child

¹Rev. Fr. Dr. G.C. Abiogu, ²Alexander Okezie Onwu, ³Dr. Leonard. T. Ugwuanyi, ⁴Dr. Felix O. Ugwuozor

¹Department of Educational Foundations, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria.

²Department of Educational Foundations, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria.

³Department of Educational Foundations, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria.

⁴Department of Educational Foundations, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria.

Address For Correspondence:

Rev. Fr. Dr. G.C. Abiogu, Department of Educational Foundations, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria.
E-mail: abiogu@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

Background: The child born a tabula rasa is a psycho-physico entity, meant to be educated. The child in the educational theory of Locke is not only a tabula rasa, but also a homo festivus (life celebrating animal). If the child is a life celebrating animal, is a timely animal and as a timely animal, there is need for a timely or organized education. Objective: The objective of this paper is to carry out a philosophic exercise on the theory of tabula rasa and education of a typical African child. It made an etymological exposition of the term, "tabula rasa". Methodology: The researchers carried out a philosophic exercise on the theory of tabula rasa and education of a typical African child. Results: The paper maintained that tabula rasa theory epitomizes experience arising from a conducive environment as the best way of acquiring knowledge. The theory of tabula rasa and educational process of the child was discussed. A critique was made on the theory of tabula rasa and the learning experience of the child. The paper as well analyzed the peculiarities of the African and African environment, which is different from western environment. It presented an ideal African education and argued on its superiority to the western education. Conclusion: The paper contended to adjudge that tabula rasa theory may not produce its formative effect in the habit and character formation of the African child. Such position of the paper is based on the fact that African environment as of now is infested with colonial mentality, and devoid of African values, culture, destiny, frame of reference and socio-political aspirations. Therefore, some implications were stated and some recommendations were proffered.

INTRODUCTION

The term tabular rasa is a Latin coinage which equates to the English "blank slate" (or more accurately "erased slate") which refers to writing on a slate sheet in chalk, but comes from the Roman tabula or wax tablet, used for notes, which was blanked by heating the wax and then smoothing it to give a tabula rasa. Consequently, the term tabula rasa is the epistemological theory that individuals are born without in-built mental content, and that their knowledge comes from experience and perception. In the 11th century. Avicenna (980 – 1037 A.D.) an Islamic philosopher concurred with Aristotle (384 – 322 B.C.) that the human intellect at birth is rather like a tabula rasa or unscribed tablet, a pure potentiality that is actualized through education before it comes to know. Avicenna further maintained that knowledge is attained through empirical familiarity with objects in this world from which one abstracts universal concepts which is developed through a syllogistic method of reasoning. In other words, observations lead to prepositional statements which when compounded can lead to further abstract concepts.

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In the 12th century, another Islamic philosopher, and a novelist Andalusian demonstrated the theory of *tabula rasa* as a thought experiment. Andalusian depicted the development of the mind of a feral child to that of an adult kept in complete isolation from society on a desert island, where the adult learns through experience alone. In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274 A.D.) advanced the Aristotelian and Avicennian notions to the forefront of Christian thought. He speculated that the mind is like an unscrubbed slate or a blank slate, or even morally neutral. Aquinas' position sharply contrasted with platonic notion. On the part of Plato (427 – 347 B.C.) human mind is an entity that pre-existed somewhere in the heavens before being sent down to join a body here on earth. Be that as it may, the writings of Avicenna and Aquinas on *tabula rasa* theory stood unprogressed for several centuries.

According to Mabbott (1973), it was the Latin translation of Andalusian philosophical novel, entitled *philosophus Autodidactus*, published by Edward Pocolo the Younger in 1671, had an influence on John Locke's formulation of *tabula rasa* in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in 1690. This is how the modern idea of theory of *tabula rasa* is mostly attributed to John Locke (1632 – 1704) an empiricist, and British educational philosopher. Locke alleged that the child's mind is *ab ovo* (initially or from birth) a *tabula rasa* in *qua nihil scriptum est* (upon which nothing is written) except experience. The child's mind at birth is without rules for processing data, that is, data is added and rules for processing are formed solely by the child's sensory experiences. For Locke, there are no natural obstructions that would block development of the child's native potential for acting freely and rationally.

To this end, Abiogu (2008) contended in his study that John Locke's theory of *tabula rasa* is to be understood as an empirical theory based on empirical observation of the development of human knowledge, which Locke attributed to the child's frame of mind, before ideas are imprinted on it by the reaction of the senses to the external world of objects. Abiogu (2008) further articulated that the theory of *tabula rasa* laid great emphasis on experience, on extra-mental realities, on things that can be seen, heard, tasted, touched, smelt, and on quantification. The child learns through experience on how to cope with life and survive his environment which is often cruel and harsh. Thus, the focus of this paper is on how the African child born a *tabula rasa* can achieve a meaningful experience in his learning environment.

1. Methodology:

The researchers carried out a philosophic exercise on the theory of *tabula rasa* and education of a typical African child.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

2.1. The Theory of Tabula Rasa and Education Process of the African Child:

The child born a *tabula rasa* is a psycho-physico entity, meant to be educated. The child in the educational theory of Locke is not only a *tabula rasa*, but also a *homo festivus* (life celebrating animal). If the child is a life celebrating animal, is a timely animal and as a timely animal, there is need for a timely or organized education. In the argument of Okafor (2006) it is the task of the educator to prepare the child's mental, moral and physical capabilities to meet any situation. This was the basis for Locke's liberal education of the youngsters. His liberal education among other things holds that for learning to be integrated into the experience of the learner, ample provision must be made for discussion, questioning and debate. Thus, Locke was true to his empiricist principle that all knowledge is derived from experience and the child makes its mind and body what they should be from experience.

From the angle of thought of Adenekan (1991) and Abiogu (2001) the theory of *tabula rasa* could be applied in the child's educational practice through the practice of habit and character formation of the child at its early formative age. The child is first formed in the habit of communication, such as how to exchange greetings with people. Through such means, language is being built up, and what is language but a means of bringing to the mind of another person an idea which is in your own mind (Angeles, 1981). When the child is being formed in the habit of exchanging greetings with people, the child at the same time learns the appropriate greetings for different periods of the day. This would enable the learner to develop a time concept, besides the learner would cultivate manners which the society considers as basic to organized life.

Notably it makes sense when the child's learning is founded on facts. Essentially the educator is to ensure that the child does things not for the sake of remuneration or reward that may accrue out of it, but for the fact of conviction of the truth or sincerity of doing things the way they ought to be done. This is knowledge for the sake of knowledge, or education *qua* education which depends on the correct education given to the child from the start.

In the advocacy of Locke as Mabbott (1973), indicated, the mind of child being like a clean slate means that the child is in potency of receiving knowledge which is provided by experience. The child who is to be formed and informed with education is of fledgling mind. The child cannot decode or synthesize any information received into a meaningful experience, or make use of it as a character-building substance. According to Abiogu

(2006) the child acquires life meaningful-experience through the impression which is done by nature, but within the social context in the school, in the house and on the street, by language and custom within the world of history and daily news. It is carried out in the form of broadcast and newspaper, music and technical science, or play and dreams. In this direction, it is the teacher, the pedagogues (child guide) or the educator, the parent or the society who in the eyes of the child represent a certain selection of what is "right" and what should be, as well as what is real or stands as fabricated poetic emphasis.

2.1.2. A Critique on the Theory of Tabula Rasa and the Learning Experience of the Child:

Critically, the problem of the tabula rasa theory in the education of the child stems from the notion of the child having a blank mind at birth. If the child's mind is blank at birth then the child is a strange thing or person. What is more, knowledge is not only acquired through the senses or empirically, because sense knowledge lacked the certainty and infallibility that through knowledge must possess. There is revealed knowledge which is outside the scope of rationality and is best suited for religious instruction or indoctrination. There is intuitive knowledge which is instilled into the mind of the knower out of matter of effortless grace. There is demonstrative knowledge which consists of understanding by means of reasoning of logical relationships among ideas. There is authoritative knowledge which is derived from the written testimony documentations, and reports of scholars or experts who lived before us. Authoritative knowledge is based on already established laws, principles, facts and documentations. It is knowledge based second-hand information.

The Rationalists as Abiogu (2001) highlighted in his study while never altogether dispensing with sense experience, have continued to stress the power of rational reason for apprehension of the substantial truth about the world. For the rationalists knowledge is merely the unfolding of the mind's innate powers in such a way that from one or some few evident principles, all knowledge can be derived without recourse to experience. The argument of the rationalists against tabula rasa theory is that there is changeability in the world of sense. Sense knowledge lacked the certainty and infallibility that a true knowledge must possess. Thus, the rationalists do not deny sense knowledge as such, they rather insisted that whatever goes by the name knowledge needs the guarantee of reason.

In the same trend of thought, the empiricists to which Locke belongs, remained patently opposed to rationalism and its doctrine of innate ideas. For the empiricists, the only gate way to knowledge is experience. However, the empiricists' contention that experience is the source of knowledge is to be understood that knowledge depended ultimately on the use of the senses, and on what is discovered as such. Similarly, the pragmatists' theory of knowledge is predicated on experiencing and doing. Their advocacy is that education is by experimentation and practice in man's striving to provide solutions to his myriad of problems. The pragmatic method is a way of examining ideas and theories with respect to their function in, and the application to experience. Indeed the rationalists, the empiricists and the pragmatists never totally denied the cardinal role of experience in forming the ideas of the child as a learner. Their bone of contention is to what extent experience modifies the child's ideas. Arguably the merit of John Locke's theory of tabula rasa lies in the fact that the child could be effectively educated through meaningful experience and concrete sensitization of the child's senses. At this juncture of the discussion, it is pertinent to ascertain what constituted the peculiarities of the African and African environment.

2.2. Peculiarities of the African and African Environment:

Africa is made up of several nation-states as a consequence of colonialism. These nation-states are also made up of diverse tribes with differences based on divergent religions, languages, and traditional occupations, attitudes, beliefs, values, and a host of others. These differences notwithstanding, there is a meeting point as regards what the Africans hold to be of great value (Egbeke, 2000). In the study of Madukwe and Madukwe (2010) pre-colonial African society had a peculiar value systems which include: The marriage institution, the family system, communalism and social security system, African traditional religions, African legal system and conflict resolution, as well as African traditional economy. These value systems are briefly discussed below.

2.2.1. The Marriage Institution:

Marriage is a social institution that is founded on and governed by social and religious norms of a society. Generally, marriage is a union of man and woman which is contracted between persons of opposite sex. From this definition sex of the parties is a vital criterion in ascertaining the legality of the marriage. In traditional African society, the marriage institution is largely polygamous in nature. In other words, more than one woman is involved unlike monogamous marriage where the marriage is just between a man and a woman. In African marriage, it is not just the business of the couples-to-be, but the affairs of both families. The choice of a marriage partner is subject to the approval of other members of the family and even gods. For the African, there is no limit to the number of children to beget. This is necessary for continuity and perpetuation of the man's family name. Notably some cultures are particular about the sex of the child. In a matrilineal society, emphasis will be on female issues while in patrilineal society, the reverse is the case. Incidentally, in matrilineal society a

man does all he could to have a male child upon whom his estate will devolve upon death especially where he had only female children who have no right of inheritance in such a society.

As a matter of fact sex is originally a fundamental criterion in marriage institutions. The modern trend in the western world is that persons of same sex can now get married as husband and wife. Many European countries have legalized same-sex marriage and other practices like Lesbianism, Gay, Bisexualism and Transgender (LGBTs). Even where there is proper marriage between a man and a woman, where the man is the head of the family, such family setting has been overturned by western women who for decades have been agitating for women liberalization. Consequently, a lot of marriages end up in divorce because of the effects of westernization. According to Madukwe and Madukwe (2010), in Italy 130,000 couples split and got divorced in 2007. The South African government has legalized same-sex marriage. David Kuria (2010) who is the manager for Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Kenya has alleged that “the homosexual rights advocates will eventually win in Uganda, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria and other parts of Africa, as they have done elsewhere in the world” (Kuria, 2010:15). Africa is already infested through westernization.

2.2.2. The Family System:

In a traditional African family, membership includes not only the man, his wife, and children but also all blood relations of a common decent such as grandchildren, nephews, nieces, and aunts. It even includes dependants that are part of the household. An African in the view of Madukwe and Madukwe (2010) counts his blessings with regard to the number of children he or she has. There is this inward satisfaction that comes from having many children irrespective of one’s standing in life, such as whether one is educated or not, sick or healthy, rich or poor, hungry or otherwise.

Regrettably, through the western family programme campaign, African family system which gloried in large number of children, has been affected. Supportive of the above, Ezeanya (2009) noted other challenges to the natural order of families in form of such western practice of surrogate motherhood, free abortion, free unions and single parenthood. The extended family practice of Africans is at the verge of extinction because of the introduction of individualism through westernization. The African practice of extended family system whereby an individual becomes fulfilled in life, only in relation to the fulfillment of other members of the extended family, is no longer obtainable today.

2.2.3. Communalism and Social Security System:

There is interconnectedness among the members of the community. As Africans bear one another’s burden, everyone becomes his brother’s keeper. There is a mutual assistance for one another. For instance those who do not have are not allowed to –perish in want. There is communal labour like clearing of bush for farming, cultivation, harvesting, house building and other things. Apart from these, where a member of the village is bereaved, others are always there to comfort the person, contribute in cash and kind to help take care of burial expenses. In a typical African setting no one goes hungry while the neighbour can help out. In fact, Madukwe and Madukwe (2010) attested that one can easily walk into the next compound and demand for food, and this would be happily offered even when the members of that compound are not eating. What is more, when a visitor enters such a compound and meets the family taking their meals, he would quickly wash his hands and join in the meal.

The principle of African communalism which presupposes equality with respect for all and responsibility of all for one, has been eroded by westernization with its attendant individualism. With the creation of cities during the colonial era family members were separated and people were detached from their traditional, social and cultural settings. Development of cities resulted in interaction of people from different ethnic groups, thus creating a heterogeneous society. Urbanization introduced fundamental changes to values applicable to its dwellers.

2.2.4. African Traditional Religion:

From the time immemorial, as Coogan (2003) maintained man has always believed in the existence of a reality greater than he is, and this has helped to define and shape his culture, and also as a panacea to the fragility and obvious finality of human existence. For Mbiti (1990) African traditional religions permeate all the aspects of the departments of Africans and their life. There is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. African religion includes belief in spirit whether ancestral or non-ancestral, magic, witchcraft and sorcery. The African believes in immortality and thus worships his ancestors who are acknowledged as intermediaries between the living members of their given families and the gods. These ancestors who are also referred to as the “living dead” are always there for the family as guardians and protectors of the family members. They are the closest link between man and the spirit-world. In fact, these ancestors are still seen as members of their respective families that should be invited to partake of the family meals.

Colonization also exposed Africans to western religion-christianity and education. Through these media, western way of worship which is fundamentally different from that of African worship system was introduced. On the other hand, Africans in their quest for literacy sent their children to school with the implication of early exposure of their young ones to the influences of western culture. These children are taught entirely new things touching all aspects of human existence. Incidentally, these teachings are openly advertised as opposite to African nature, and must be jettisoned. Consequently, these young brains nurtured with western ways of life and thought, could not but accept anything European as superior and better compared to anything African.

2.2.5. African Legal System and Conflict Resolution:

In every society, the importance of social order and peace cannot be overemphasized. Under traditional African setting, there are laws, customs, regulations, rules, taboos and others which constitute the moral code and ethics of a particular community. These moral codes and ethics are meant to regulate the conduct of the members for the maintenance of community solidarity. They are either human laws or divine laws. While human laws are punished with human sanctions, divine laws, when breached, attract divine sanctions. In most cases, breach of these laws are considered as not just a wrong to an individual but to the entire community and thus, must be punished by all as a corporate body (Mbiti, 1990). In conflict resolution, different methods are employed depending on the nature of the dispute and the ultimate goal to restore peace and order in the community.

The effect of westernization is evidenced in our legal system which is communal in nature. The western legal system encourages and promotes individual rights against the state. Thus, an individual can assert his or her right in a law court independent of the right of others as a whole. It is well established fact that adjudication in law courts does not guarantee peaceful resolution of disputes.

2.2.6. African Traditional Economy:

Before the advent of colonization with its concomitant western culture, African economy was distributive in nature. This implied that those who labour are to reap the fruit of their endeavour thereby ensuring social security, while the lazy ones are adjudged the irresponsible members of the family (Egbeke, 2000). Importantly, economy at this time was simple and mostly subsistence in nature. From the point of view of Madukwe and Madukwe (2010), there was virtually no competition, and transactions were carried out through exchange of goods and services. There was no monetary value attached to such goods and services. Communal labour was used to boost agriculture through the age grade system. In other words, there was no monetized economy.

Today, as a result of colonialism, money is the measure of everything, the symbol of social status, and means of social security. The quest for personal enrichment at all costs is now the order of the day. The pursuit of material possession has so obsessed many Africans that a lot of social vices abound today in the society. The vices range from arm robbery, materialism, corruption, kidnapping, political assassination, political thuggery, examination malpractice to electoral malpractices, and others.

Analytically, the researcher has endeavoured to present the peculiarities of the African and African environment. The findings portrayed that African environment and value systems have been undermined by the effects of westernization. African marriage institution has been bastardized. The extended family practice of Africans is at the verge of extinction. The colonial creation of cities introduced an individualistic Eurocentric value system that was alien to African communal mores. The western religion (christianity and education) opposed African way of life as barbaric in nature, and recommended that it should be jettisoned. African moral codes and ethics meant to regulate community solidarity were negated. Distributive African economy was turned into a quest for personal enrichment at all costs. Thus, the African child born a tabula rasa will have a lot of challenges to learn "in unconducive environment. The learning of such child will certainly be devoid of any meaningful experience. The problem remains if there is an ideal African education, that could provide better learning experience for the African child born a tabula rasa.

2.3. What is an Ideal African Education?:

The goal of education and the method of approach may differ from place to place, nation to nation, people to people. The Greek idea of an educated man was one who was mentally and physically well balanced. The Roman, on the other hand, placed emphasis on oratorical and military training. In "Old Africa" as Awosika (1992) articulated, the warrior, the hunter, the nobleman, the man who combined good character with a specific skill was adjudged to be a well-educated and well-integrated citizen of his community. In "Old African" society the purpose of education was clear; functionalism was the main guiding principle. African society regarded education as a means to an end, not as an end in itself. Education was generally for an immediate induction into society and a preparation for adulthood. African education emphasized social responsibility, job orientation, political participation and spiritual and moral values. Children learnt by doing, which means that children and adolescents were engaged in participatory education through ceremonies, rituals, imitation, recitation and demonstration. They were involved in practical farming, fishing, weaving, cooking, carving, knitting, and so on.

Recreational subjects included wrestling, dancing, drumming, acrobatic display and racing, while intellectual training included the study of local history, legends, the environments (local geography, plants and animals), poetry, reasoning, riddles, proverbs story-telling and story-relays. Physical-training is combined with character-building, and manual activity with intellectual training (Fafunwa and Aisiku, 1992).

The superiority of the ideal African education over the western education lies in the fact that, the aim, the content and the methods of traditional education are intricately interwoven. They are not divided into separate compartments as is the case with the westernized system of education. Arguably, irrespective of the level of education and training given during the pre-colonial days in Africa, it was functional because the curriculum was relevant to the need of the society. Unemployment, if it existed at all, was minimal and very few young men roamed the villages and towns with nothing to do. Meanwhile, what are the things in an ideal African education that could be considered as constituting conducive environment?

Conducive environment in an ideal African education can be judged by its performance within a given social context. For instance, in a polygamous African family there may be several "mothers". They all play a part in caring for the youngest generation but ultimate responsibility for each child lies with its natural mother. She carries the child on her back wherever she goes, puts the child to bed, looks after the child when the child is ill and teaches the child how to speak. Full of curiosity, the baby watches her mother's every gesture, and learns to interpret her smiles, her frowns and her tears.

Little by little, this lively curiosity reaches out beyond the mother's world. Somewhere between the ages of 4 and 6, the grandparents, and sometimes uncles and aunts begin to take part in the children's education. They send the children on little errands, teach them to be obedient and to respect their elders (this is a very crucial matter in African society), and to observe certain rules of behaviour. The grand parents also teach the children the history of their family or of their people. Interestingly, an ideal African education has a very naturally organized conducive environment, which could enable the African child born a tabula rasa to have a meaningful learning experience.

2.4. Implications of Tabula Rasa Theory for the African Child and his Educator:

In the philosophy of tabula rasa theory Locke postulated that originally the mind is like a blank slate. In other words, the mind is very sensitive in its reflections like a mirror. It can easily polarize odds, ends, and even strange images if it is not guided or controlled. By implication all who are charged with the education of the African child should not have known less that any knowledge or experience given to the child at his early formative stage sticks to his mind, and affects his life journey.

As the child's environment is enriched, his experiences are also enriched and the speed of his mental development is also increased. This implies that the quality of the thinking of the learning child depends on the quality of his concepts, which in turn depends on the quality of his learning environment. Conducive environment, therefore, is a *conditio sine qua non* (a necessity) in the education of the African child.

The child learns more by observation and imitation. He is very quick to observe any difference between theory (principle) and practice. He watches his teacher's action closely, both inside and outside schools. By implication the teachers or parents who do not practice what they teach, are giving the worst character training to their educands. Thus, the aphorism sustains its philosophic onions for the educators of the African child that: "actions always speak louder than words".

3. Recommendations:

Based on the ongoing discussion and the implications of this paper, the following recommendations are made:

i. For the African child born a tabula rasa to learn accordingly in African environment, the African government, educational philosophers and practitioners have to resolve the African identity crisis through educational programmes that will emphasize self-confidence, innovation, enduring and purposeful personality peculiar to African person, value and culture.

ii. In the philosophy of tabula rasa theory, Locke tried to correct the hollowness, narrowness, inadequacy and stark moral duplicity of the education practice of his time. He was insistent that truth is knowledge, and knowledge occurs when the mind's phantasia Katakletika (power of cognition) corresponds or agrees with the object to be known. Thus, the African educators should not fail in their duty to process the subject matters of the African child's interest, before choosing them as materials of educative value.

iii. All who are involved in the upbringing or rearing of the African child within and outside the school have to consider themselves as the child's role models. They have to behave well for, they serve as mirror by which the child sees himself, and they may be the only "bible" for the child to read.

Conclusion:

The researchers have carried out a philosophic exercise on the theory of tabula rasa and education of a typical African child. Effort has been made in this paper to posit that the philosophy of tabula rasa theory is a

thoughtful means of educating the child or a typical African child per se. It is an education practice based on experience arising from a conducive environment. The paper contended to adjudge that tabula rasa theory may not produce its formative effect in the habit and character formation of the African child. Such position of the paper is based on the fact that African environment as of now is infested with colonial mentality, and devoid of African values, culture, destiny, frame of reference and socio-political aspirations.

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