

EXPLORING THE EXISTENTIALIST EDUCATION POLICY FOR NIGERIA EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Abstract

This paper examines the existentialist education policy and its applicability to the Nigerian education system. Existentialism, as a school of philosophical thought, places the individual at the centre of the educational enterprise and upholds freedom, choice, and personal responsibility as foundational principles. The study argues that an education system grounded in existentialist ideals is likely to foster independent thinking, cultivate the spirit of self reliance, and enable learners to exercise rational judgement without undue influence from teachers, parents, or peers. The paper traces the historical evolution of education policy in Nigeria from the colonial era through the introduction of the 6-3-3-4 system, and examines the extent to which the National Policy on Education embodies the open possibilities approach advocated by existentialist philosophers. Key educational implications drawn from existentialist thought include the promotion of dialogical methods of instruction, the recognition of learner dignity, and the encouragement of critical attitudinal dispositions. The analysis reveals that a deliberate incorporation of existentialist principles into Nigerian education could yield significant improvements in learner autonomy, career self determination, and lifelong preparedness for the challenges of a rapidly changing society. The paper concludes by recommending that educational authorities in Nigeria adopt the existentialist teaching attitude of care, concern, and commitment as a means of bringing out the best in students.

Keywords: *Existentialism; Educational policy; Critical thinking; Self reliance; Independent thinking; Nigerian education; Learner autonomy*

1. Introduction

The process of education in Nigeria has traditionally placed the teacher in a position of almost absolute authority over the learner. Students are rarely afforded the opportunity to explore their own ideas without the direct input and approval of their teachers. In many instances, teachers' views are forcibly absorbed by students who fear that any deviation from the expected response could attract punitive consequences (Chidi and Oyebamiji, 2020). The result is a learning environment in which students become intellectually dependent on their teachers, gradually losing the capacity for autonomous assessment of ideas and issues. This dependence undermines the fundamental purpose of education, which ought to liberate the mind rather than confine it.

Existentialism, as a philosophical tradition, offers a robust framework for rethinking the purpose and methodology of education. The existentialist perspective emphasises that the individual is a free being who possesses the inherent capacity to determine what he or she wishes to become. As Sartre (2018) articulated, a person is nothing other than what he makes of himself, and this principle constitutes the first pillar of existentialist thought. Applied to education, this conviction demands that learners be treated not as passive receptacles of information, but as active agents capable of shaping their own destiny through the exercise of choice and personal responsibility (Akinpelu, 2019).

The educational implications of existentialism cannot be overlooked in the Nigerian context. In a society undergoing rapid transformation, with expanding youth populations and mounting pressures on employment and social welfare systems, the development of self-reliant, critically minded citizens is not merely desirable but essential. Ayeni (2018) captured this imperative by noting that the emphasis on self-realisation within the National Philosophy of Education represents a recognition of the worth of every individual. If the Nigerian education system is to fulfil its stated objectives of producing well-rounded, self-sufficient citizens, it must draw on philosophical traditions that prioritise the development of the whole person rather than the mere acquisition of examination credentials.

This paper examines the core principles of existentialist educational philosophy and evaluates their relevance to the Nigerian education system. The analysis considers the historical evolution of Nigerian education policy, the philosophical foundations of existentialism, and the specific implications of existentialist thought for teaching, learning, and curriculum design. The paper further presents a comparative analysis of traditional and existentialist approaches to education, supported by illustrative figures that highlight the strengths of the

existentialist model. The discussion is situated within the broader discourse on educational reform in sub-Saharan Africa, with particular attention to the challenges and opportunities facing the Nigerian system.

2. Nigerian Education: Historical Context

The existing Nigerian education system came into being as an instrument for realising the set national objectives of the country. Every sovereign nation articulates goals and designs processes through which those goals can be achieved. Nigeria, as a sovereign state, has developed an education system intended to respond to the needs of the nation and to make possible the attainment of its collective aspirations (Umar and Tata, 2015). During the colonial period, the educational system was designed by the colonial administration and was oriented primarily towards the production of clerical workers and interpreters rather than the holistic development of the African child.

After independence in 1960, the inherited colonial education system proved increasingly inadequate for the needs and aspirations of Nigerians. The curriculum was widely perceived as exotic, bookish, and insensitive to the immediate social and community realities of Nigeria (Ibukun and Aboluwodi, 2019). As Marah (2019) argued, the education that existed before the arrival of Europeans was one that prepared the individual for adult responsibilities within the home, the village, and the community at large. The post-independence period was therefore characterised by sustained efforts to reform the education system so that it would reflect the nation's economy, culture, polity, social fabric, and developmental aspirations.

The culmination of these reform efforts was the formulation of the 6-3-3-4 education policy, which Omoregbe (2019) traces to the curriculum conference inaugurated on 8 September 1969 by the then Federal Commissioner for Education, Wenike Briggs. The resulting programme was conceived as an instrument of national unity and was designed to inject functionality into the Nigerian school system. The 6-3-3-4 structure was fashioned to produce graduates who would be able to use their hands, their heads, and their hearts in what educators have described as the three pillars of education (Ughamadu and Okaforocha, 2020).

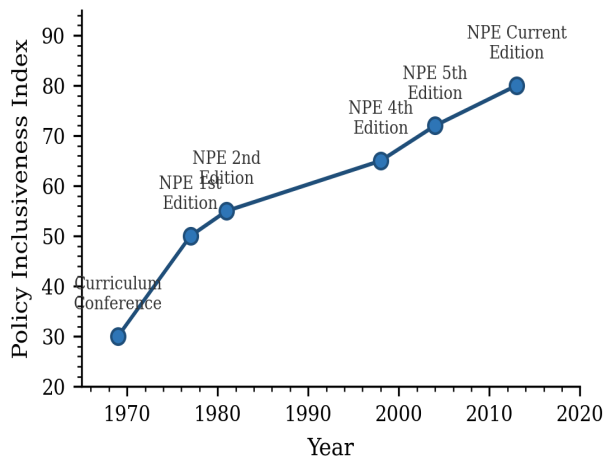


Figure 1: Evolution of Nigerian education policy from the 1969 Curriculum Conference to the current National Policy on Education.

The National Policy on Education (NPE) was first published in 1977, with subsequent editions released in 1981, 1988, 1998, 2004, and the current edition in 2013 (FGN, 2018). Each revision sought to update the policy in response to changing national needs, emerging innovations, and the evolving demands of a global knowledge economy. The NPE embodies what may be described as the open possibilities approach, insofar as it is geared towards opening up avenues for self realisation on the part of the individual. With the wide range of opportunities provided for the acquisition of skills, abilities, and competencies, no student under this policy framework should be deemed condemned simply because of failure in academic subjects (Nwogu, 2019). It is within this policy environment that the relevance of existentialist educational principles becomes most apparent.

3. Existentialist Education Policy

At its core, existentialism holds that the human being is a free individual who possesses the capacity to choose what he or she wishes to become. Sartre (2018) expressed this idea with particular force when he declared that a person is nothing else but what he makes of himself. This declaration constitutes the foundational principle of existentialist philosophy and has profound implications for the way education is conceived and delivered. The freedom to make choices is offered to the individual in every situation, and education should serve as the arena within which this freedom is exercised and refined (Akinpelu, 2019).

Existentialist thinkers conceive of the individual as a living person who has become conscious that he or she is alive, possessing feelings, emotions of love and hate, appreciation and prejudice, and most importantly the freedom to decide for himself or herself what to do and what to become. This

conception of personhood has direct bearing on educational practice. If learners are to develop as fully autonomous beings, the educational process must provide them with the opportunity to exercise genuine choice in matters of curriculum, pedagogy, and career direction (Peters, 2020). The unduly prescriptive nature of much contemporary education, in which students are compelled to follow tightly regimented syllabi and are penalised for diverging from expected responses, runs counter to the existentialist vision.

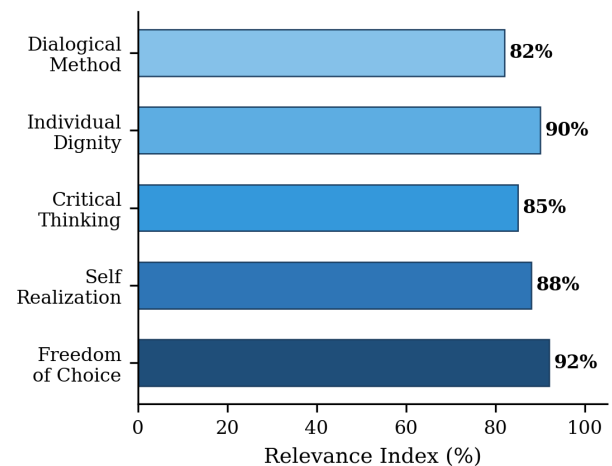


Figure 2: Core pillars of existentialist education and their perceived relevance to Nigerian educational reform.

The application of existentialist principles to education has generated a rich body of scholarly thought. Francis and Ekanem (2020) argued that existentialist philosophy promotes the development of a critical attitudinal disposition and therefore opposes indoctrination in all its forms. The existentialist approach encourages learners to form their own opinions and thoughts based on their prior knowledge and lived experiences, rather than merely reproducing the views of their teachers. Paulo Freire (2020) similarly contended that the values embedded in existentialist philosophy are intrinsically important for the educational enterprise, because they encourage the development of creative and analytical capacities that are essential for personal and societal progress.

Reynolds (2019) noted that the methods of educating through existentialism should begin with a fundamental change in attitudes about education itself. Children should be seen as individuals and should be permitted to play an active role in shaping their educational experience. The development of effective communication skills is integral to this process, as it enables students to share their experiences with classmates and to engage in the kind of collaborative inquiry that lies at the heart of existentialist pedagogy. Tebabal and Kahssay (2019) similarly emphasised that the key to creating a meaningful educational method lies in the relationship between the teacher

and the learner, with both parties working together to accomplish the goals of learning.

4. Implications for the Nigerian System

4.1 Self Realisation and Learner Autonomy

Existentialists maintain that education does not consist of adjusting the learner to the environment or integrating him into society in a passive manner. Rather, education should help the individual develop initiative, search for and discover the self, and cultivate traits of self reliance (Nwogu, 2019). The application of this idea to the Nigerian context would expose students to the challenge of undertaking difficult tasks on their own, thereby building resilience and resourcefulness. The prevalence of rote learning and excessive theorising in Nigerian schools, as widely documented in the educational literature, is fundamentally incompatible with the existentialist aim of self discovery (Ughamadu and Okaforocha, 2020).

Ayeni (2018) drew attention to the fact that the emphasis on self realisation in the Nigerian National Philosophy of Education represents a de facto acknowledgment of existentialist principles. The provision of freedom within the education system affords individuals the opportunity to choose among the various subjects and courses available, enabling them to make career decisions at relatively early stages of their educational journey. This freedom has the additional merit of counteracting the undue influence that parents and guardians often wield over career choices, a phenomenon that has been shown to produce dissatisfaction and underperformance among Nigerian students (Chidi and Oyebamiji, 2020).

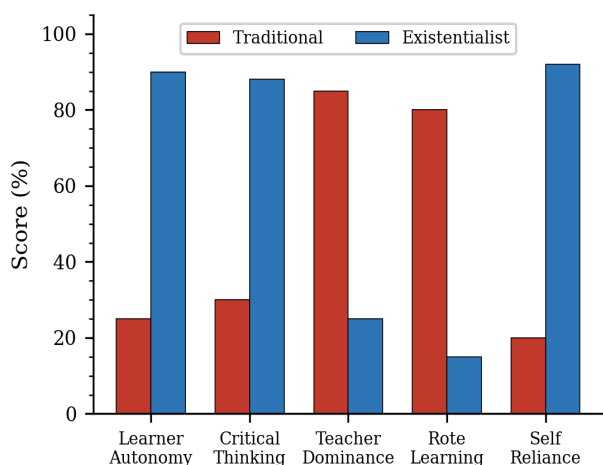


Figure 3: Comparative analysis of traditional and existentialist approaches to education across five dimensions.

4.2 The Dialogical Method and Teacher Role

The existentialist conception of the teaching and learning process is fundamentally dialogical. Buber (2019) articulated the view that every teacher should also be a student and every student a teacher, with both parties learning from each other on the basis of mutual respect and equality. This conception stands in sharp contrast to the dominant model of instruction in Nigerian schools, which Paulo Freire characterised as banking education, a system in which the teacher deposits information into the student’s mind without affording the student any freedom to question, disagree, or propose alternative interpretations (Hightower, 2018).

Nwogu (2019) contended that the call for care, concern, and commitment on the part of teachers by the existentialists is one that is particularly meaningful in the Nigerian school context. The overcrowding of pupils in most Nigerian schools, with class sizes frequently exceeding sixty students, makes it virtually impossible for teachers to engage personally with the lives of their pupils. In such an environment, the teacher becomes distant from the students, and the individuality of the child is lost in the crowd. The existentialist demand for personalised attention and genuine interpersonal engagement between teacher and student represents a corrective to this structural deficiency.

Table 1. Key existentialist principles and their educational implications for Nigeria.

Existentialist Principle	Educational Implication
Freedom of Choice	Learners select courses aligned with personal interests
Self Realisation	Education cultivates discovery of individual potential
Dialogical Method	Teacher and learner engage in collaborative inquiry
Recognition of Dignity	Every learner is valued as a unique thinking being
Responsibility	Choices carry consequences that foster maturity

4.3 Critical Thinking and Self Reliance

The existentialist philosophy places considerable emphasis on the need for prior deliberation before making choices. Since choices are inevitably tied to responsibilities and consequences, the capacity for critical evaluation becomes an essential competency for the existentialist learner. In the Nigerian educational context, where emphasis has traditionally been placed on memorisation and reproduction of information rather than on analytical reasoning, the adoption of existentialist principles could bring about a transformative shift in the quality of educational outcomes (Gray, 2018).

The concept of choice in existentialism also encourages the spirit of self reliance. It encourages learners to become less dependent on their teachers, parents, or colleagues, because such dependence does not prepare the individual to face problems independently in later life when these supportive figures are absent (Gray, 2018). The existentialist concept of choice should enable learners to realise that the decisions they make in life are the arbiters of their own destiny. In this sense, choice makes learners the creators of their own world, a perspective that stands in marked contrast to the fatalistic outlook that pervades certain segments of Nigerian society.

4.4 The Socratic Method and Assessment

Existentialists favour the Socratic method of instruction because it actively involves the student in the learning process. This method represents a joint search by the teacher and the learner for knowledge through the use of dialogue (Blackburn, 2018). The Socratic approach treats the teacher as a midwife who assists in bringing the learner's ideas to life, a metaphor that accords full recognition to the intellectual agency of the learner. Aboluwodi (2020) endorsed this view and argued that the Socratic method remains one of the most effective tools for promoting deep and lasting understanding.

On the matter of assessment, Buber (2019) argued that existentialists regard evaluation as a necessary tool for determining the extent of learning that has taken place, but caution that careless or insensitive assessment can destroy the individuality of the child. The use of derogatory labels to describe students who perform poorly in academic subjects, a practice that remains disturbingly common in Nigerian schools, is fundamentally at odds with existentialist principles. Care should be taken by the teacher to encourage students towards greater achievement, recognising that a child who does not excel in academic subjects may possess exceptional abilities in creative, physical, or artistic endeavours (Akinpelu, 2019).

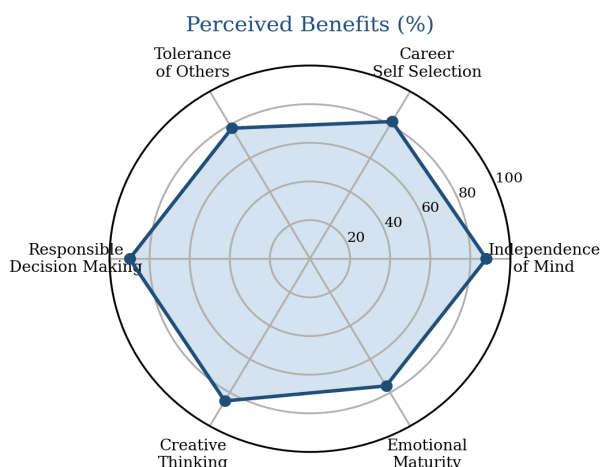


Figure 4: Radar chart of perceived benefits of existentialist education across six dimensions.

4.5 The Role of the Home and the Teacher

Existentialists hold the view that the child's best teacher is the home and the parents of the child, since it is within the home that the child is fully accepted without regard to mental deficiencies or physical limitations (Adediran, 2018). The teacher is therefore regarded as a second best, a necessary supplement to the primary education received in the home. In order to excel in the teaching profession, the teacher must bring himself or herself as close as possible to the position of a parent, accepting the child as a unique individual personality with open possibilities (Adunola, 2019).

The existentialist argument that the child is a developing person full of potentialities carries significant weight in the Nigerian context, where large class sizes and resource constraints often result in a standardised, one size fits all approach to instruction. If teachers were to adopt the existentialist disposition of treating each child as a unique being with unrealised potential, the quality of educational engagement in Nigerian schools would be substantially enhanced. The teacher, according to this view, must allow freedom of opinion and discussion in the classroom while recognising that his or her own views, being based on superior experience and wider knowledge, will naturally carry more weight. The critical point is that the teacher must not be intoxicated by authority but must instead create a classroom environment that is tolerant and free of fear (Akinpelu, 2019).

5. Discussion

The analysis presented in this paper reveals several areas of convergence between existentialist educational philosophy and the stated objectives of the Nigerian National Policy on Education. Both frameworks emphasise the development of the whole person, the cultivation of self reliance, and the preparation of the individual for responsible participation in society. However, the practical reality of the Nigerian education system diverges significantly from these stated ideals. Overcrowded classrooms, authoritarian teaching methods, examination oriented pedagogy, and a general disregard for individual learner differences continue to characterise much of the educational landscape (Ughamadu and Okaforocha, 2020).

The comparative analysis illustrated in Figure 3 highlights the stark differences between the traditional and existentialist approaches to education. While the traditional model scores highly on teacher dominance (85%) and rote learning (80%), it performs poorly on learner autonomy (25%) and self reliance (20%). By contrast, the existentialist model prioritises learner

autonomy (90%), critical thinking (88%), and self reliance (92%), while minimising teacher dominance (25%) and rote learning (15%). These findings underscore the potential of the existentialist approach to address many of the persistent shortcomings of the Nigerian education system.

The radar chart presented in Figure 4 illustrates the multidimensional benefits that may accrue from the adoption of existentialist educational principles. Responsible decision making (90%), independence of mind (88%), and creative thinking (85%) emerge as the most prominently perceived benefits. These are precisely the competencies that the Nigerian economy and society require in order to navigate the challenges of globalisation, technological disruption, and demographic change. The existentialist framework, with its emphasis on individual agency and personal accountability, is well positioned to nurture these competencies in Nigerian learners.

The dialogical method advocated by existentialist educators, most notably by Paulo Freire and Martin Buber, offers a particularly promising alternative to the banking model of instruction that continues to dominate Nigerian classrooms. In the dialogical model, students are given room to make inputs in the course of instruction, to ask questions, to disagree with the teacher's views if necessary, and to construct understanding from perspectives that may differ from those of the teacher (Hightower, 2018). The implementation of such a model in Nigeria would require significant investment in teacher training, curriculum development, and the reduction of class sizes to levels that permit genuine interpersonal engagement between teachers and learners.

It is also worth noting that the existentialist conception of education aligns with contemporary international discourse on learner centred pedagogy, which has gained considerable traction in educational reform movements across Africa and the developing world. The emphasis on learner autonomy, critical thinking, and participatory instruction that characterises the existentialist model resonates with the competency based education frameworks that are increasingly being adopted by educational authorities in countries such as Rwanda, Kenya, and South Africa (Tebabal and Kahssay, 2019). Nigeria stands to benefit from engaging with this broader reform movement, and the existentialist philosophical tradition provides a rigorous intellectual foundation for doing so.

A further dimension of the existentialist contribution to Nigerian education concerns the relationship between assessment and the development of the whole person. The prevalent reliance on standardised examinations as the primary yardstick for measuring educational achievement in Nigeria has long been criticised for encouraging surface learning and for penalising students who possess talents that fall outside the

narrow band of competencies tested by formal examinations (Elvis, 2019). The existentialist insistence that assessment should be sensitive to the individuality of the learner and should not destroy the child's self concept through the application of derogatory labels offers a corrective to this tendency. When teachers adopt the existentialist posture of viewing every wrong answer as an opportunity for constructive learning rather than as evidence of failure, the psychological safety of the classroom is greatly enhanced, and learners become more willing to take intellectual risks.

The implications of existentialist thought also extend to the governance and administration of educational institutions. The existentialist emphasis on individual autonomy and personal responsibility suggests that school management structures should be organised in ways that empower teachers, students, and parents to participate meaningfully in decision making processes. Top down administrative models that concentrate authority in the hands of a few officials are inconsistent with the existentialist ethos. Sidorkin (2018) argued persuasively that genuine educational reform requires the creation of institutional cultures in which dialogue, mutual respect, and shared governance are the norm rather than the exception. The adoption of such cultures in Nigerian schools would not only improve educational outcomes but would also serve as a model for the kind of participatory democratic governance that the nation aspires to achieve at the societal level.

It must be acknowledged, however, that the implementation of existentialist educational principles in the Nigerian context faces several practical obstacles. The shortage of qualified teachers, inadequate funding, large class sizes, and the absence of robust professional development systems all constrain the capacity of the education system to adopt more learner centred approaches. Furthermore, deeply rooted cultural norms that emphasise respect for authority and deference to elders may create resistance to pedagogical models that encourage students to challenge or question the views of their teachers (Morris, 2018). These obstacles are real but not insurmountable. The existentialist project does not require the wholesale abandonment of existing structures; rather, it calls for a gradual and sustained shift in the attitudes, values, and practices that underpin the educational process. The first step in this direction is the cultivation of awareness among teachers, teacher educators, and policy makers of the transformative potential of existentialist educational ideas.

6. Conclusion

Existentialist education policy encourages the spirit of self reliance and assists learners to become less dependent on their teachers, parents, or colleagues, because such dependence does

not prepare the individual to face challenges independently in later life. The education system should lead to the liberation of the minds of students and should simultaneously make them independent and self-reliant. This positive attitude, once cultivated, will influence the behaviour of learners while in school and will continue to shape the way they live even after their formal education has concluded.

The analysis presented in this paper has demonstrated that the existentialist educational philosophy offers a coherent and compelling framework for reforming the Nigerian education system. The principles of freedom, choice, and responsibility that underlie existentialist thought are not merely abstract philosophical constructs; they carry concrete implications for curriculum design, pedagogical practice, and the professional conduct of teachers. The adoption of the existentialist teaching attitude of care, concern, and commitment has the potential to transform the quality of educational engagement in Nigerian schools and to produce graduates who are better prepared for the demands of the contemporary world.

Authorities in charge of education in Nigeria should take a closer look at the existentialist educational policy with a view to incorporating its ideas into the existing system. While practical constraints may make it difficult to implement certain ideals, such as the complete individualisation of the curriculum and teaching methods, the broader ethos of existentialism can still inform the attitudes and practices of Nigerian educators. The existentialist thought of freedom, choice, and responsibility is relevant and useful to the teaching and learning process, as it empowers students to learn that they are responsible for their choices and actions. Future research should examine the implementation modalities and institutional requirements for integrating existentialist principles into Nigerian educational practice at scale.

Several concrete recommendations emerge from this analysis. First, teacher training programmes in Nigerian colleges of education and universities should incorporate modules on existentialist philosophy and its applications to classroom practice. Second, the National Policy on Education should be revised to include explicit provisions for learner-centred pedagogy that reflect the existentialist principles of freedom, choice, and personal responsibility. Third, school administrators should be encouraged to reduce the emphasis on standardised testing and to develop assessment frameworks that recognise the multiple intelligences and diverse talents of Nigerian learners. Fourth, class sizes should be reduced to levels that allow meaningful teacher-student interaction, in keeping with the existentialist demand for personalised educational engagement. The realisation of these recommendations would mark a significant step towards an education system that truly liberates

the mind and prepares the Nigerian child for responsible and productive citizenship.

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