

HUMANISM AND ITS VARIANTS: EXAMINING THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examines humanism and its various strands classical, secular, religious, and integral as philosophical foundations for democratic education in Nigeria. It assesses how each variant contributes to a vision of education that respects human dignity, promotes critical thinking, and fosters participatory citizenship. Drawing on philosophical analysis and documentary review, the study evaluates the extent to which humanist ideals such as freedom, reason, responsibility, and the common good can inform educational practices in a diverse and pluralistic society. The paper highlights Jacques Maritain's notion of integral humanism as particularly relevant to Nigeria's socio-political context, given its emphasis on the full development of the human person within a community and in relation to transcendent values. The research finds that while secular and liberal models of humanism support democratic engagement through autonomy and civic education, religious and integral approaches offer a more holistic approach that unites moral, spiritual, and intellectual development. The paper argues that integrating these variants within Nigerian educational policy could strengthen democratic culture, reduce ethnoreligious tensions, and empower learners to become agents of social transformation. Ultimately, the study underscores the need for a philosophically grounded, context-sensitive model of democratic education that balances individual rights with communal responsibilities.

Keywords: Humanism, Democratic Education, Integral Humanism, Nigeria, Citizenship, Educational Philosophy

1.0 Introduction

Education is universally acknowledged as a fundamental vehicle for individual development and societal transformation. In democratic societies, it assumes an even more pivotal role, serving not only as a tool for intellectual growth but also as an essential mechanism for cultivating civic responsibility, critical thinking, and social justice. The Nigerian state, in its quest for national unity and sustainable development, has made explicit its commitment to democratic ideals, as reflected in policy documents like the National Policy on Education (NPE). Among its stated goals is the building of “one indivisible, indissoluble, democratic and sovereign nation founded on the principles of freedom, equality and justice.”

At the heart of this educational vision lies humanism, a philosophical orientation that emphasizes the dignity, worth, and agency of the human person. Humanism, whether in its classical, religious, secular, or critical form, offers profound insights into the aims, methods, and structure of democratic education. It advocates for a learner-centred approach that honours individual autonomy while promoting communal well-being. In the Nigerian context, where historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors often undermine democratic ideals, humanistic philosophy presents both a critique and a roadmap for reforming education in line with democratic values.

This paper therefore aims to examine how the different variants of humanism contribute to shaping democratic education in Nigeria, with a particular focus on their philosophical foundations. Drawing on key concepts such as freedom, equality, and justice, as well as the contributions of influential thinkers like John Dewey and Paulo Freire, the paper investigates how humanistic principles can be harnessed to foster a more inclusive, participatory, and transformative educational system in Nigeria. Additionally, the work will explore the current challenges facing democratic education in Nigeria and offer philosophical reflections on how humanist ideals can inform practical solutions.

2.0 Conceptual Clarification

2.1 Humanism

According to Paul Kurtz, “Humanism is a philosophical and ethical stance that emphasizes the intrinsic value, dignity, and rational capacity of human beings.” Rooted in classical thought and evolving through the Renaissance and Enlightenment, humanism centers on human agency, critical thinking, and the potential for self-actualization. It rejects supernatural explanations in favor of human-centered reasoning and empirical inquiry, advocating for the betterment of humanity through education, art, science, and ethical governance.

2.2 Democratic Education

John Dewey, a philosopher and educational reformer defines democratic education as “an approach to teaching and learning that prepares individuals to participate actively and responsibly in democratic society.” He points out that democratic education emphasises critical thinking, inclusiveness, civic responsibility, freedom of expression, and respect for diverse perspectives. Democratic education aims to empower learners to contribute meaningfully to the political, social, and economic life of their communities. In Nigeria, where democratic ideals are still consolidating, education must foster values such as equality, justice, and participatory governance.

3.0 Variants of Humanism

Humanism is not a rigid worldview; it manifests in various forms, each contributing uniquely to educational philosophy. The following variants offer diverse perspectives relevant to democratic education in Nigeria.

3.1 Religious Humanism

Religious humanism combines humanist ethical philosophy with religious rituals and community life, often emphasizing the moral and spiritual aspects of human development. According to Kurtz, unlike secular humanism, it accommodates theistic beliefs while maintaining a focus on human dignity and social justice.

In Nigeria, where religion plays a central role in public and private life, religious humanism can bridge moral teachings with democratic ideals, promoting tolerance, peace, and social cohesion in schools.

3.2 Secular Humanism

“Secular humanism is grounded in reason, science, and human-centered ethics, explicitly excluding supernatural or religious dogmas.” It promotes individual freedom, secular governance, and the universal rights of all people. In a democratic educational structure, secular humanism supports critical inquiry, scientific literacy, and respect for diversity, attributes essential to nurturing rational and responsible citizens in a pluralistic society like Nigeria.

3.3 Classical Humanism

Classical humanism traces its origins to Ancient Greece and Rome, where philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Cicero emphasized rational discourse, civic virtue, and moral education. “It promotes the development of the whole person, intellectually, morally, and physically, through the study of the humanities.” Incorporating classical humanism into Nigerian education would revive the appreciation of logic, ethics, and civic responsibility, essential for sustaining democracy.

3.4 Medieval Humanism

Medieval humanism developed within the Christian scholastic tradition, seeks to reconcile classical learning with religious faith. According to James Hankins, “Medieval humanism was not a contradiction in terms, but a vital phase in the transmission and reinterpretation of classical culture, shaped by Christian doctrine and the institutional life of the medieval Church.” Thinkers like Thomas Aquinas fused Aristotelian philosophy with Christian doctrine, emphasizing the rational and moral potential of humans within a divine order. For Nigerian education, especially in faith-based institutions, medieval humanism underscores the harmony between reason and faith, offering a balanced approach to moral and intellectual development.

3.5 Renaissance Humanism

Renaissance humanism reasserted the dignity and potential of humans through a revival of classical texts and a focus on individual achievement. Kristeller writes in his book, *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*, “Renaissance humanism may be defined as the literary and scholarly movement which studied and revived the classical antiquity, and emphasized the value and dignity of man, especially in his capacity for self-development through education.” Thinkers like Erasmus and Petrarch also celebrated the liberal arts as tools for personal and civic improvement. Nigerian democratic education can draw from this tradition by emphasizing literature, history, and the arts as means of fostering critical thinking, creativity, and active citizenship.

3.6 Critical Humanism

Critical humanism, influenced by Marxist and postmodern thought, questions established power structures and advocates for social transformation through education. It emphasizes the liberation of marginalized groups and challenges systemic oppression. In Nigeria, where issues of inequality, corruption, and ethno-religious conflict persist, critical humanism can inspire educational practices that empower students to challenge injustice and promote democratic reform.

4.0 Philosophical Foundations for Democratic Education in Nigeria

4.1 Key Philosophical Principles

One of the two statements written in the National Policy on Education as the overall philosophy of Nigeria is as follows: “to live in unity and harmony as one indivisible, indissoluble, democratic and sovereign nation founded on the principles of freedom, equality and justice.” Therefore, in this section, we shall delve into each of these principles, exploring how exactly they serve as philosophical foundations for democratic education in Nigeria.

4.1.1 Freedom

Among the various characteristics of a democracy, freedom is key. It lies at the very heart of every democratic society. Indeed, freedom is inextricably tied to fundamental human rights in a democracy and some of these rights include “freedom of thought and expression, freedom of religions, freedom of assembly and association.” From the foregoing, we see that freedom is a fundamental philosophical principle of democratic education as practised in Nigeria.

Notably, Nigeria has had a long history of colonialism, authoritarian governance in the form of military rule and socio-political instability. These unwholesome realities have, more often than not, stifled both individual and collective freedom. Hence, the quest for freedom in the educational sector is for us not merely a banal philosophical ideal but a practical imperative. It is only fitting that democratic education in Nigeria be founded on the belief that every learner possesses the intrinsic right to think, question, express and make choices, unencumbered by any form of indoctrination or systemic exclusion.

At a fundamental level, freedom in education has to do with creating an environment which gives room for the development of autonomy, critical thinking and moral responsibility. In the words of John Dewey, a major proponent of democratic education, freedom is not simply a license to do whatever what wills neither is it the absence of constraint. Rather, it is the ability to meaningfully partake in shared experience and decision-making processes. Hence, education in Nigeria should be aimed at enabling students grow into active citizens who are capable of making valuable contributions to the Nigerian society.

In all, incorporating freedom as a driving principle of democratic education in Nigeria has some interesting implications for national growth and development. Any educational system which grooms free and responsible persons is very much likely to bring forth leaders and followers who are undauntingly pledged to foster justice, accountability and the public good. It is therefore apparent that the philosophical principle of freedom is tremendously practical as it paves the way for a culture of democracy where differences are negotiated via dialogue.

4.1.2 Equality

This is one another core value on which Nigeria's educational system was established. The National Policy on Education is filled with both direct and implied mentions of equality as a basic principle of education in Nigeria. At the foundational level, equality in education refers to the notion that all individuals, no matter their gender, ethnicity, religion, abilities or economic background, should have access to quality education. In fact, this is one of the fundamental human rights practised in every true democracy.

In the National Policy on Education, it is stated blatantly that “education is compulsory

and a right of every Nigerian irrespective of gender, social status, religion, colour, ethnic background and any peculiar individual challenges.” In another segment of the same document, one of the specific goals of education in Nigeria is stated thus: “to ensure and sustain unfettered access and equity to education for the total development of the individual.” These two allusions to the foremost document on Nigeria's educational system reveals that the country is not oblivious of how democratic ideals are to be applied in education.

However, though Nigeria as a nation has codified the principles of a democratic education, the reality on ground is far from these stated ideals. There is a wide range of systemic inequalities pervading the country's educational landscape, from unequal school funding and urban-rural disparities to gender imbalances and discriminatory cultural norms. Many young Nigerians, particularly those in the north and rural communities, are continually faced with significant barriers to education. These include poverty, early marriage, child labour, religious extremism and insecurity, all of which undermine the principle of equal opportunity.

4.1.3 Justice

The role of justice as a philosophical principle in shaping democratic education in Nigeria cannot be overemphasised. Within the context of education, justice involves the fair disbursement of educational resources, the safeguarding of individual rights in learning environments as well as the wider societal commitment to dealing with inequalities. Hence, justice is not simply about treating all equally but rather about making sure that every learner gets what is necessary to excel, considering the divergent needs, contexts and challenges of each learner.

Remarkably, John Rawls' theory of justice as fairness is of particular relevance here as it advocates for social arrangements beneficial to the least advantaged in the society in order to achieve equal basic liberties for all. In the Nigerian educational system, this calls for systems which prioritise marginalised groups such as children from impoverished communities, girls, students with disabilities and those affected by conflict or displacement. Justice demands that the structural disadvantages faced by these groups be corrected through targeted support, inclusive policies, and responsive pedagogy.

As is the case with the two previously discussed principles, justice is in short supply in the Nigerian educational system. For instance, regional imbalances remain a reality in that students from rural parts of the country have significantly limited access to quality education than their peers in urban centres. Issues such as dilapidated infrastructure, lack of qualified teachers, poor funding and insecurity further widen the justice gap. Also, discriminatory cultural norms and policies can result in the systematic exclusion of certain groups.

4.2 Contributions of Notable Philosophers – John Dewey and Paulo Freire

One cannot speak about democratic education without mentioning the groundbreaking work of philosophers like John Dewey and Paulo Freire. Their philosophies have provided intellectual and practical structures which continue to impact educational thought, policy and practice on a global scale. In Nigeria where democratic ideals remain both a challenge and a goal, the influence of these philosophers is also very much felt.

4.2.1 John Dewey

John Dewey, an American philosopher and educator, is highly revered as the father of progressive education which is a reaction to the perceived narrowness and formalism of traditional education. He opined that education should transcend beyond the passive transfer of knowledge to being a participatory process that prepares individuals for democratic life. In Dewey's view, democracy is not merely a political system but also a way of living that necessitates certain habits of mind like critical thinking, cooperation and open communication.

Consequently, there is an urgent need to foster educational environments which promote participation, dialogue and reflection rather than rote learning and authoritarian pedagogy. Classrooms should be a microcosm of a democratic society, a place where students learn by doing, engaging in problem-solving activities and developing respect for divergent perspectives. Dewey's ideas on education support curriculum reforms which are relevant to the learners for which it is designed and also aimed at solving real life problems encountered in the society in which they shall play significant roles.

In discussing equality, Dewey opined that equality of educational opportunity has the following characteristics: equal access to education, equal educational treatment and equality of educational outcome. Equal access means that features like school fees, quality teachers and adequate facilities are available to all while equal educational treatment deals with the provision of the above items according to one's abilities. Equality of educational outcome, on its part refers to the need for public expectations of school products within similar operation levels to be alike.

4.2.2 Paulo Freire

Paulo Freire was a philosopher and educator who hailed from Brazil. He, like his learned colleague, Dewey, made great strides especially through his theory of critical pedagogy. In his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire critiques what he refers to as the "banking system of education" wherein teachers feed information to passive students. Rather, he advocates for a dialogical method which involves teachers and students engaging in mutual learning, paying attention to their social reality and working toward freedom from oppression.

This thought pattern is particularly relevant to the Nigerian educational system which breeds disparities and inequalities. Freire's focus on raising awareness, also known as conscientisation, is in accordance with the need for an educational system which enables students from marginalised backgrounds to identify and challenge structures of domination. By fostering learner-centred learning as well as critical inquiry, the philosopher's approach helps to groom a citizenry capable of making sensible contributions to democratic governance and overall change in the society.

4.3 Education as a Tool for Civic Engagement and Nation Building

Education plays a central role in enhancing the social and political life of every country. This is even truer for democracies where its function extends beyond knowledge transmission to working towards having an active citizenry who contribute their quota ever diligently to their nation's growth. Civic engagement and nation building are not achievable without a well-informed, participatory and responsible citizenry. These qualities, on their part, are cultivated only through an educational system rooted in sound philosophical principles.

Invariably, one benefit of education to civic engagement is its ability to provide the awareness, skills and critical faculties which individuals need to engage the democratic process in a sensible and purposeful manner. These have to do with having a proper comprehension of rights and responsibilities, engaging in dialogue, exercising one's franchise, holding leaders accountable and contributing to the development of one's community. In other words, a democratically inspired education aids learners to subject societal establishments to critical thinking, mull over ethical issues and engage in collaborative efforts to solve extant problems.

In addition, education contributes tremendously to fostering unity, national identity and social cohesion, all of which are necessary ingredients for nation building. These it achieves by infusing in learners shared values like justice, tolerance, mutual respect and equity. Given the ethno-religious plurality of the Nigerian state, education remains every relevant in putting up a unifying force, aiding the bridging of divisions and fostering peaceful coexistence.

Also, a sound and well-planned education provides the populace with the requisite technical and intellectual skills for economic development as well as innovation. Hence, an enlightened citizenry will most likely demand transparency, combat corruption and contribute their quota to the making of decisions at various echelons. In this way, education stops being simply a personal asset but more importantly, a public good essential to effective nation building.

5.0 How the Variants of Humanism affect Democratic Education in Nigeria

The variants of humanism all stress the value, dignity and agency of the human person. These, when merged with education in Nigeria, significantly influence all its facets, particularly curriculum development, the educational structure as well as the National Policy on Education. From religious and secular humanism, to classical and Medieval humanism, to renaissance and critical humanism, each of these variants affects Nigeria's democratic education in no small manner. We shall now take a dive into each one at a time.

5.1 Curriculum Development

Curriculum development can be defined as a “planned, purposeful, progressive, and systematic process to create positive improvements in the educational system.” From this definition, we deduce that curriculum and its development stand at the centre of every educational system. A deficient curriculum inevitably leads to a deficient educational enterprise.

In Nigeria, some variants of humanism continue to inform the aims of education, methods of education, content selection and the learner's role, all of which are key elements of curriculum development. For instance, classical humanism, rooted in Greco-Roman tradition and subsequent Christian scholasticism, puts a stress on the cultivation of virtue, moral development and intellectual excellence. The influence of this variant is quite visible in mission schools and faith-based institutions that emphasise character formation together with academic achievement.

Furthermore, secular humanism which incorporates human reason, scientific inquiry and secular ethics into education is also of immense value to curriculum development in Nigeria. The influence of this type of humanism is evident in public education policies which foster critical thinking, development of scientific skills and empiricism as a theory of knowledge. This variant of humanism is brought to life in subjects like civic education,

integrated science and social studies.

Also, religious humanism has made its fair share of impact on Nigeria's curriculum development. It avidly affirms the intrinsic worth and dignity of the human person as created by God. Hence, a curriculum developed with this idea is one that bring together in a coherent whole moral instruction, religious studies and ethical values. Nigeria's curriculum is heavily influenced by religious humanism. That is why many schools include subjects like Christian Religious Studies and Islamic Religious Studies.

5.2 Nigeria's Educational Structure

Nigeria's educational structure is built on certain philosophical foundations, a key one being humanism and its variants. These provide both the ideological and practical structures through which education is ideated, passed on and evaluated in Nigeria. Each of these variants of humanism have shaped and continue to shape Nigeria's system of education immensely, especially as is stipulated in her National Policy on Education.

To begin with, classical and religious humanism have been of great influence to the educational system as practised in Nigeria. As was previously established, the impact of these humanism variants is evident in missionary and faith-based schools where there is a dual emphasis on moral education and intellectual formation such that academic training goes hand in hand with character formation. Hence, subjects like Religious and Moral Instruction, and co-curricular activities such as catechism, Quranic studies and civic morality clubs are incorporated into the educational system.

In addition, secular humanism, which stresses the need for rationality and empirical knowledge, has contributed immensely to the current structure of Nigeria's educational system. A prominent case is the formulation of the National Policy on Education which prioritises science, technology and critical thinking as key elements of basic and secondary education. Particularly, the current schooling structure, the 9-3-4 model (9 years of basic education which includes primary and junior secondary, 3 years of senior secondary education and 4 years of tertiary education) reflects the secular goal of equipping learners with the requisite cognitive and technical skills for national development.

In like manner, the Freirean inspired critical humanism has influenced Nigeria's educational structure to be more inclusive and socially responsive. It challenges mediocre structures like the top-down and authoritarian models of education and advocated for dialogical, participatory learning processes that empower marginalised groups. Programmes such as non-formal education and adult literacy are offshoots of this form of humanism.

Also, Medieval and Renaissance humanism have influenced education structures in Nigeria, albeit indirectly. While Medieval humanism is expressed in the scholastic tradition of the Middle Ages which emphasised the fusion of faith and reason, Renaissance humanism underscored the study of classical texts, the dignity of the human person and the development of individual potential through education. The influence of these variants can be seen in the healthy blend of religious instruction and the liberal arts in Nigeria's educational system.

6.0 Challenges of Democratic Education In Nigeria

This section examines three key challenges: top-down pedagogy, socio-economic inequality, and religious and ethnic pluralism, highlighting their impact on fostering

democratic values in Nigerian education since democratic education aims to foster critical thinking, civic participation, and inclusive values, equipping students to engage in a democratic society. In Nigeria, however, implementing democratic education faces significant hurdles due to systemic, socio-economic, and cultural factors.

6.1 Top-down Pedagogy

The Nigerian education system often relies on a top-down, teacher-centered pedagogy that emphasizes rote learning and memorization over critical inquiry. This approach, rooted in colonial educational models, prioritizes compliance and reproduction of facts, stifling creativity and independent thought. Students are rarely encouraged to question authority or engage in participatory learning, which are essential for democratic citizenship. For instance, classroom interactions typically involve unidirectional teaching, where teachers deliver content and students passively receive it, limiting opportunities for dialogue or debate. This pedagogical style undermines the development of skills like critical analysis and problem solving, which are vital for active participation in a democratic society.

Moreover, the curriculum often lacks content on civic education or democratic principles, further disconnecting education from democratic ideals. Efforts to reform pedagogy, such as introducing student-centered methods, often face resistance due to inadequate teacher training and resource constraints.

6.2 Socio-economic Inequality

Socio-economic inequality poses a formidable barrier to democratic education in Nigeria. The education system reflects deep disparities in access and quality, driven by wealth, geography, and social status. Children from affluent families attend well-funded private schools with better facilities and trained teachers, while those from low-income households often rely on under-resourced public schools or drop out entirely. According to a 2020 report, over 10 million Nigerian children, primarily from poorer regions, are out of school, exacerbating inequalities. This divide perpetuates a cycle where only a privileged few develop the skills needed for civic engagement, undermining the democratic principle of equal participation. Additionally, economic pressures force many students into child labour, limiting their access to education and exposure to democratic values. Addressing this challenge requires equitable funding, infrastructure development, and policies to ensure universal access to quality education.

6.3 Religious and Ethnic Pluralism

Nigeria's diverse religious and ethnic landscape complicates the implementation of democratic education. With over 250 ethnic groups and a near-equal split between Muslims and Christians, cultural and religious differences often influence educational content and delivery. In some regions, religious and ethnic biases in curricula or teaching practices alienate certain groups, fostering division rather than unity. For example, northern Nigeria's emphasis on Islamic education in some schools can marginalize non-Muslim students, while southern schools may prioritize Christian perspectives, creating parallel educational systems. These divisions hinder the development of a shared national identity and mutual respect, both critical for democratic coexistence. Furthermore, ethnic tensions sometimes lead to demands for localized curricula, making it challenging to create a unified educational framework that promotes inclusive democratic values. Integrating pluralism into education through inclusive curricula and teacher sensitization

is essential but faces resistance due to entrenched cultural norms and political interests. Overcoming these obstacles requires coordinated efforts from policymakers, educators, and communities to create an equitable and participatory educational system.

7.0 Evaluation

The exploration of humanism and its variants as philosophical foundations for democratic education in Nigeria reveals both opportunities and significant challenges as are listed above. Humanism, with its emphasis on human dignity, rational inquiry, and ethical development, aligns closely with the principles of democratic education, which seeks to foster freedom, civic responsibility, justice and equitable participation in society. Variants such as Religious Humanism, Secular Humanism, Classical Humanism, Medieval Humanism, Renaissance Humanism, and Critical Humanism offer nuanced perspectives that can enrich educational frameworks by promoting the values listed above. However, implementing these philosophies in Nigeria's educational system faces substantial hurdles, this includes the challenges discussed above which are: Top-down pedagogy, socio-economic inequality, and religious and ethnic pluralism.

Top-down pedagogy stifles critical thinking, a cornerstone of democratic participation, while socioeconomic disparities limit access to education, perpetuating inequality. Religious and ethnic pluralism, if mismanaged, risks fostering division rather than unity. Together, these issues create an education system that struggles to prepare students for democratic citizenship. Despite these obstacles, opportunities exist for reform. Initiatives like teacher professional development, increased education funding, and inclusive curriculum design could align Nigeria's education system with democratic ideals. However, systemic change requires political will and sustained investment, both of which have been inconsistent.

8.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has examined the philosophical foundations of democratic education in Nigeria through the lens of humanism and its variants. It has shown that education, as a cornerstone of democratic society, must be rooted in principles that respect the intrinsic worth, dignity, and potential of every individual. The exploration of humanism in its religious, secular, classical, medieval, renaissance, and critical forms reveals a rich tapestry of ideas that can guide Nigeria toward a more just, inclusive, and participatory educational system.

By grounding democratic education in the values of freedom, equality, and justice, Nigeria can begin to address the deep-rooted disparities that plague its educational landscape. Humanism, as a flexible and multi-dimensional philosophy, offers both critique and constructive guidance for reform. Philosophers like John Dewey and Paulo Freire provide essential frameworks for rethinking pedagogy, moving from authoritarian and rote methods toward dialogical, learner-centered, and contextually relevant approaches. The paper also discussed challenges such as rote-based learning, socio-economic inequalities, and cultural tensions which must be addressed to create an education system that nurtures critical, engaged, and ethically grounded citizens.

Ultimately, the alignment of Nigeria's educational aims with humanist ideals calls for deliberate and sustained effort, not only in policy but also in practice. Only then can the vision articulated in the National Policy on Education, a united, democratic, and just nation, become a living reality in the hearts and minds of future generations.

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