

Martins Buber’s Philosophical Idea of “I – Thou (You)” and its Relevance to Modern Education in Nigeria

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Abstract

Martins Buber (1878-1965), an existentialist with philosophical idea of “I and Thou (You)” is well accepted in the western world for its applicability to learner-centre education. It is based on positive, mutually rewarding relationship facilitated by genuine dialogue that brings about true unity among individuals. This paper attempts to show how this could impact positively on the Nigerian Educational system in terms of improved methodologies, teacher-student relations, ethical relations and the restoration of positive relationship between the educational system and the community in order to curb the decline in the educational system.

“All real living is meeting” (Buber, 1958)

Introduction

Since the beginning of industrialization and the growth of large urban cities, most especially after the end of World War II, a philosophical theme, not wholly new, that was concerned about existence, human existence, the quality and conditions of the existing human individual started to take shape. By the middle of the 19th century, the main components of this theme, that is generally referred to as Existentialism had been worked out by a Dane, Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). He had criticized Hegel for his attempt to “capture all of reality in his system of thought, yet in the process lost the most important element, namely existence” (Stumpf 1983).

For Kierkegaard, existence implies human beings as individuals that are confronted with various issues of choice, decision making and commitments that define an essential self which are sought to be actualized. As such, ‘existence precedes essence’. In the contemporary form, existentialism is a reaction to the fact that the individual had over the centuries been pushed to the background by systems of thought, historical events and technologically driven societies. Even philosophy for the most part dealt with technical issues of metaphysics, epistemology and ethics in a general and objective manner that has little or no human touch as reflected in logical positivism. Rapid industrialization has further dehumanized the western man who had been converted from subjects into objects by being harnessed to machines.

Religion, the traditional bastion of human hope, meaning and sense of worth and moral guidance has come under the scrutiny of rational and scientific thinking as reflected in Nietzsche’s proclamation that for all its intent and purposes God is dead. He urged that a new conception of human existence be built without taking God into consideration (Stumpf 1983).

Some existentialists such as Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre, Karl Jasper and Albert Camus took a frankly atheistic position in formulating their brand of existentialism. Others, such as Soren Kierkegaard (Danish Lutheran) Nicolas Berdyaer (Russian Orthodox) Gabriel Marcel (Roman Catholic), Jacques Maritan and the Jewish thinker Martin Buber ‘turned to religion in order to rediscover what they believed had been missed by rational and scientific thinkers’ (Stumpf 1983). This group, the theists, has also been referred to as personalists or relational philosophers to distinguish them from the atheist group (Curtis and Boulwood 1975).

However, these two groups of existentialists agree that the traditional philosophy was too academic and far from life to have adequate meaning for human existence. They all are opposed to the objective, systematic and schematic tendencies that began with Rene Descartes and reached their apex in the Hegelian system (Curtis and Boulwood 1975). They favour a more spontaneous mode of expression in the attempt to relate with the authentic concerns of individual existence in concrete forms. The personalists, including Buber aim at replacing concentration on the objective world by considering the human person as the centre of their thought and have developed an outlook based on the individual.

The thought of personalists is more valuable for the philosophy of education. Personalists see the threat to the individual in the development of modern societies where the individual has the tendency to be lost in the milling masses. Buber said that “machines which were invented in order to serve men in their work were no longer like tools; an extension of man’s arm, but man became that extension doing the bidding of the machines” (Curtis and Boulwood 1975). Jaspers in tune with Buber stated that the tendency of the technological age is to transform nations into masses seemingly to participate in development while individuals were being alienated and dehumanized through mass education which made them blind and thoughtless in relation to their own existence. This tendency is entrenched in developed nations and taking roots in developing ones like Nigeria.

Personalists also point out the lack of existential thinking in nearly all the extant theories of knowledge. They readily accept the objective thinking of the scientists if it is limited to its proper sphere of scientific manipulations to the extent that man is not reduced to object of scientific

investigation. In all these, personalists believed in a relational and human philosophy and education for the individual to realise his existence. In this vein, Wilhelm Dilthey viewed that the type of thought which is suitable to the human studies differs greatly from those applicable to the physical sciences. While the latter is concerned with objective world, the former requires dealing with mental and spiritual life. So, the only way to understand an individual is from the inside by reliving another person's experience and projecting ourselves into the person. It is by doing this that real meeting and understanding takes place. Understanding according to Dilthey is "a rediscovery of the I in the Thou" (Curtis and Boulwood 1975).

Martin Buber offered a humanistic alternative to the sharp differences between the science and objective dominated philosophies which tend to interpret human reality in mechanistic terms and idealistic philosophies which abstracted the human spirit from being entrenched in the real world of human community.

In his book "I and Thou" Buber analyzes two types of relationships for a proper understanding of human reality as I-It and I-You (Buber 1958).

In the "I-it" relation, the individual deals with the world and other persons functionally, manipulatively as things to be investigated and used. The world and people are for the individual like instruments for carrying out purposes. This type of relation is wrong as it has been a major cause of many problems in modern life as reflected in the educational systems of nations that see schooling as a production factory.

In the I-You relationship, the individual encounters other persons and God as Thou (You) this involves interpersonal dialogue, an encounter which opens up the true depths of reality that engenders direct connection and a sense of unity for the individuals and the community with the necessary ethical underpinnings. To Buber, education is relational between the teacher and the learner on one hand between the educational system and the community on the other.

Education should generally be seen as a relation based enterprise in that the nature and the direction of the society determine the essence of its educational system. The philosophy of the Nigerian educational system is based on the integration of the individual into a sound and effective citizen. In order to achieve this, education has been directed to inculcate the following values:

- a. The respect for the worth and dignity of the individual.
- b. Faith in man to make rational decisions.
- c. Moral and spiritual values in inter personal and human relations
- d. Shared responsibilities for the common good of the society
- e. Promotion of emotional, physical and psychological health for all learners (National Policy on Education, 2004)

From the above, the Nigerian educational system is humanists oriented and rational in outlook where the individual is not objectified as a mechanical means to an end. However, foreign influence in socio-cultural terms, economic downturn and political incompetence have led to little or non-attainment of these philosophical ideals which the government intends to achieve by centering educational activities on the learner for maximum self development and fulfillment and to relate education to overall community needs amongst others (National Policy on Education, 2004). How then can the objectives of the educational system be achieved without relation-based philosophical ideals such as Buber's?

Economic downturn has led to lesser spending on education which has put a lot of pressure on the existing infrastructure resulting in large over crowded classes at all levels of education thereby reducing and hampering teacher-learner relations and by extension tending towards educational dysfunction between the school and the society.

Buber's I-Thou (You) relationship opens avenue for encounter in which people could engage with each other fully through dialogue. To Buber, "all real life is encounter that is driven by dialogue which involves all kinds of relation to self, to others and to all forms of created being" (Vu Nguyen, 2008). We can only grow and develop, according to Buber once we have learned to live in true relation with others and recognize the possibilities of the space between us which makes self knowledge possible. The educational import of this is such that education is based on authentic relations between teachers and learners where knowledge that is not imposed by the teacher is the basis of true pedagogy.

Furthermore, Community is one of the main focuses of most educational systems. In Buber's "I and Thou (You)", relations should tend beyond individualism and collectivism for the future generations. Buber sought to create a dialogical community which is a third way relation between the I-You and collectivism which helps in the development of genuine community. This open inter-subjective dialogue is essential for holding the society together and sustaining cultural creativity that helps in sustaining mutual relations with a living centre. The building of an effective centre presupposes a foundational ethical outlook that binds people in true and mutual relations together.

The educational implication of this cannot be overemphasized. Buber, a teacher and an adult educational practitioner, believed in an educational system that is based on mutual relations-dialogue of inclusion at all levels and also an educational system that values the direct relation or appropriation of education in an emotional way by the community so as to make education the builder of the community with the appropriate ethical system i.e. character development.

What is our Concern?

The Nigerian educational system is in need of re-orientation more especially in making it society friendly. Policy formulators and educational practitioners need to see education in relational terms of its relevance of direction, implementation and its methodology and the ends it wishes to serve as a facilitator of societal development purpose. It should be for restructuring of socio-economic and political incompetence. The system is not only mitigated by lack of infrastructure, there is also the noticeable downward trend in teacher-learner relationship, low morale tending towards learners alienation, lower ethical standard leading to cultism, absenteeism, etc. The educational system seems to be unable to heal itself.

Buber's Educational Theory and Its Relevance to Pedagogue in Nigeria.

Buber's epistemology is entrenched in his metaphysical views of the philosophical idea of 'I-You'. This emphasizes a positive mutual and holistic encounter of two beings in their authentic existence. For Buber, a relation is central to human existence and reality. A person to him is at all times engaged with the world in one form of these modes. I-You. Or I-It. The vehicle employed to describe these modes of being is one of dialogue which expresses interpersonal nature of human reality.

According to Buber, knowledge of self should be first and foremost. For that reason, learners must be taught to explore their two autonomous instincts the originator and the communion.

The originator instinct helps the learner to learn about themselves – capacity building in relation to their world based on the societal ethical standard. The communion instinct makes the learner to be conscious of the mutuality and sharing which prepares the learner for true dialogue with 'Thou' and by extension, the community (Yaron, K, 2000). These two instincts must go hand in hand, the absence of any could lead to alienation of the learner.

As an existentialist, education is subjective, Buber encourages the active role of the learner in selecting and building his/her own knowledge as to be effective in his relations or encounter with people. For Buber, modern education that often gives priority to objective knowledge has little or no relevance.

The goal of the learner is to turn objective knowledge into active knowledge which helps in self actualization in the relational world. So, the “nurturing of rational capacities” not the “provision of opportunities for self expression and growth” though necessary are not the major functions of education. For education to serve as an agent of change, it must free itself from the shadow of history moving the learning and his potential to the right and desirable direction in relational scheme of the community. So sustenance and development of the community is key in the goal of education.

Since the 1973 National seminar which was the fall out of the National curriculum conference of 1969, Nigeria has not convened and all encompassing discussion about the nature, scope and the necessary changes that are necessary about her educational system in view of the dynamics of the society. Instead, Government officials do handpick ‘stakeholders’ in an ad-hoc manner to discuss the presumed problems of education. To a large extent, the outcome of these has not been effective in finding solutions to educational problems thereby alienating the larger Nigerian society.

Buber makes distinctions between “to learn” and “to know”. He sees learning to be the “becoming character of the act of knowing” (Murphy 1988). He divides knowledge into two kinds – knowledge of self and knowledge of reality. A person needed both to experience and participate in the relational world characterized by pure dialogue (Vu Nguyen 2008). His theory of knowledge is based on the primary reality of relation which truth is disclosed by knowing, loving and believing as a result of mutual and holistic encounter and other relationships of everyday life and not solely based on objective assessments. As such, coercion, indoctrination, propaganda or preaching are not proper sources of truth.

The Nigerian society in recent years has been under great pressure of religious ‘reawakening’ from both Christians and Muslims who have established educational institutions at all levels directly and in few cases indirectly propagating their doctrines and belief systems.

Pupils and students are coerced to attend religious gatherings and instructed to behave in accordance to religious ethical standards.

As with other existentialists, Buber encouraged the study of the humanities and the liberal arts, language, history, geography, the social sciences and the natural sciences to the extent that they do not turn learners into objects in the classroom where learning is not relational. Existentialists tend to encourage vocational education and engage in psychotherapy in an attempt to help learners regain their self-esteem or worth so as to assert himself if he must take cognizance of others who in turn recognize his personhood in the reciprocal relation (Omatseye 2004). Other subjects included by Buber are moral education, aesthetic education, community and adult education.

These are adequately reflected in the Nigerian educational system but are not given their appropriate places and emphasis. Moral education to a large extent is seen as religious education; as such the Christian Religious Studies and the Islamic Religious Studies are emphasized. Whereas the comprehensive syllabus for moral education is yet to emerge. The curriculum aims to train students for both human and intellectual development using such methods as logic, dialogue and critical meaning-making process.

In religion and moral education, learners learn how to interpret traditions through images and symbols in music, art and literature and develop ways to understand their meanings and their environment which helps learners to build their personalities and character.

Aesthetic education helps in the creative imagination and sensitivity to the cultural laden values and realities of the communities.

Community and adult education connects individuals together as a community which promotes sharing certain ideals and enhancing the ability to set and achieve specific aims among members as well as encourage inter-communal dialogue (Vu Nguyen 2008).

The teacher occupies the central position in Buber's educational methodology and pedagogy. In the teaching learning process, Buber exalted the teacher learner relationship and dialogue. The teacher should take "a formative, disciplinary and highly purposeful role". Buber further sees teaching as the act of giving birth. He stressed in "Teaching and Deed" that he who teaches the tradition of his fellowman is regarded as though he has brought him to life.

Within the Nigerian society, the respect for teachers has waned considerably while the governments have taken away some powers to instill discipline among students. Generally, education has gradually failed to reflect the tradition and culture of Nigeria most especially in the private and religious owned schools. Mainly Euro-Christian and Islamic cultures are on the rise, while Nigerian languages are on the verge of extinction. Since there are large classes in government schools, personal relationships between teachers and students have reduced greatly resulting in low student academic performance and character development.

Furthermore, he sees the teacher as a healer of souls who occupies a central position in the lives of the students and the community. The teacher should stand as simple personal witness to the process of education in an active and loving manner showing concern for his students in full relations with them. The teacher far from being perfect is also a human being with his/her strength and flaw who should embrace his functions which include counseling in an authentic manner.

The teacher should act as a 'filter and selector'. As a filter his task is to refine the diverse messages arriving from his surrounding and as a 'selector' he must stand in contradiction to the old education characterized by a passive acceptance of tradition as well as the new education which are not proper and conducive to learning. The relationship between teachers and students is hierarchical as the teacher takes the major responsibility in exerting influences upon the learners as well as their growth and in the development of their potentialities. However, interference of the undue type and arbitrariness is not encouraged. The pedagogy is entirely dialogical in order to engender mutual creativity and complete openness between the teachers and learners.

A good teacher, says Buber, "educates when speaking as well as when silent, during the lessons as well as during recess, during occasional conversation, through his own behaviour provided he really exists and is really present" (Buber, 1951" "Adult education" cited by Vu Nguyen). Teaching method is dominated by dialogue while other means that help the learner achieve their goals by the use of different techniques and activities are encouraged, Buber believed that relation in education is one of pure dialogue which stimulates inclusion. Inclusion in the sense that a capacity to develop a dual sensation between the teacher and the learner that has been described as experiencing oneself and simultaneously perceiving the other in its singularity (Yaron 1994). In this way one can come to know the other physically and spiritually. This has falsely been referred to as empathy.

Buber maintained that genuine education of character is genuine education for the community (Buber, 1947:445). Ethics entail engaging with the learners with their whole being in mutual relation. The educator educates from his own personal virtues and flaws through personal examples and according to circumstances and conditions. Ethics involves character development that helps in the ability to make choices as a result of freedom and being able to face the consequent responsibilities which will help in discovering our true human nature. The introduction of values that lay claim to absolutism into character education is seen as an anomaly for ethical values are relative.

Conclusion

In the discourse of education, Buber's influence is significant. He might not have developed a systematic pedagogy but he has beaten a clear path in transforming the relationship between teachers and students and has established the role of true communication and language in educational practice which has led to authentic relations, care and reciprocation in educational matters.

In modern educational practice in Nigeria, Buber's overall relevance as made clear above to all sphere of our education is very visible and germane.

The Nigerian teachers at all levels need to be re-invigorated to begin to deal with students on a deeper personal level that is authentic so that students do not feel alienated or stranded in this era of large classes and increasing teacher-student ratio due to near collapse of infrastructure. This alienation has driven many students into cultism, crime, prostitution, serial absenteeism, etc. Teachers in the same vein are no longer seeing themselves as role models in the hue of Buber's principles. The lack of mutual and engaging meeting between teachers and learners is one of the greatest challenges of the Nigerian educational system which has led to lower academic performances.

The lack of mutual understanding and dialogical relations between the system of education and the community has brought about the lack of interest in educational activities by parents. To many, payment of fees is what they owe the educational system and not any meaningful participation in remodeling education to meet societal needs. As a result education has serially failed to meet our challenges in infrastructural development, socio-economic and in building a corp of progressive leaders most especially in politics.

The educational system will benefit immensely if education is seen as a 'relation issue' that should be in tandem with every facets of the Nigerian society in an 'I-You' philosophical idea rather than a few government officials generating directive at intervals that pleases their political and economic interests.

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