Developing Children's Critical Thinking Abilities Through Critical Pedagogy: Is the Ghanaian Culture a Threat?

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Abstract

Most African countries have focused on transforming education from teacher-centred methods to learner-dominated forms of education. Since the major goal of the recent transformations in African education is to foster the development of learners' critical thinking/problem-solving skills, it makes sense if teachers across the continent adopt instructional approaches that align with critical pedagogy. We, however, suspect that the tenets of critical pedagogy and critical thinking development appear to be extremely at variance with the culturally accepted norms of bringing up children in the socio-cultural context of Ghana. Based on a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of some selected Ghanaian proverbs, the current study aimed to analyse how children are culturally constructed and how that potentially poses a threat to the implementation of critical pedagogy and the development of critical thinking in the Ghanaian child. The findings confirm the idea that the socio-cultural norms of most African societies tend to inhibit the growth of students' critical thinking abilities. We argue that the way proverbs shape children's identities within the sociocultural context of Ghana tends to have a detrimental effect on how well children learn as well as the development of their critical thinking skills. Our analysis therefore concludes that a Ghanaian child may be born a critical thinker, but the socio-cultural expectations and the cultured upbringing thwart the realisation of this innate potential.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, Critical Pedagogy, Critical Discourse Analysis, Childhood Construction, Ghanaian Proverbs

Introduction

The development of children's critical thinking and problem-solving appears to be one of the crucial aims of African education in recent times. Learners in Africa are expected to develop their critical thinking and problem-solving skills to function effectively and contribute to societal development (Schendel, 2013; Setlhako & Msila, 2013). Teachers are, thus, encouraged to adopt learner-centred methods. This approach, endorsed by researchers, enhances rational analysis and evaluation of information. These are attainable when given the chance to challenge the status quo (Rahimi & Sajed, 2014; Oberman & Sainz, 2021). We argue that such an approach to education aligns with critical pedagogy. Nonetheless, critical pedagogy, an educational approach crucial for developing critical thinking skills (Rahimi & Sajed, 2014), appears to clash with traditional African society's socio-cultural norms and expected child-adult power relations (Ndofirepi & Cross, 2015). Teachers' preparedness to enact a pedagogical approach that clashes with established sociocultural norms of a typical African society like Ghana is the suspicion that provoked our interest in this study. Our particular interest was to unveil the Ghanaian worldview of *childhood* and how such worldview and societal expectations could inhibit the enactment of critical pedagogy and the development of children's critical thinking abilities. To this end, the current study engaged in a Critical Discourse Analysis of childhood constructions in some selected Ghanaian proverbs.

In the next sections of the study, we briefly present the nexus between critical thinking and critical pedagogy, the African perspective of childhood, how proverbs serve as a tool for constructing social reality, and CDA as an analytical framework for the study. After that, we present the research methods, results, discussions and conclusion, and the study's limitations.

Critical Pedagogy and Critical Thinking

The objective of critical thinking is to enable students to logically and thoroughly challenge existing knowledge (Ennis, 1996). According to Norris and Ennis (1989), critical thinking focuses on rational and introspective thoughts that determine what should be done or believed. This suggests that knowledge should be generated in the classroom, allowing students to confirm the accuracy and legitimacy of information, eliminating the need for forced absorption. When it comes to finding knowledge, critical thinkers in the classroom are generally encouraged to challenge preconceived notions, expand on their own opinions, and reflect on their activities (Dahl et al., 2018). This implies that promoting critical thinking in the classroom demands teachers to adopt pedagogies that eliminate timidity and empower students to explore knowledge. Critical pedagogy appears to be one of the most effective methods of achieving such a form of learning (Giroux, 2010).

Freire's problem-posing approach in education encourages active student participation, stimulating cognitive and expressive abilities, challenging the curriculum, and assessing repressive systems in social settings. Freire's work was crucial to the adoption of critical pedagogy in classrooms. The development of critical thinking abilities is linked to the implementation of critical pedagogy in the educational system (Cowden & Singh, 2015). It requires teachers to facilitate learning by challenging conventional African society's views on child education, fostering critical thinking abilities, and addressing effective instructional challenges. However, our major argument is that the African worldview about childhood does not seem to align with such an educational approach to developing the critical thinking skills of children. The next section throws more light on this scholarly discourse by looking at how childhood is viewed in the African sociocultural context.

The African Perspective of Childhood

Childhood is thought to be a sociocultural construct (Hedegaard, 2009; Gittins et al., 2020). This means that one's cultural background has a role in defining one's status as a child. According to Ndofirepi and Cross (2015), a child in a typical African tradition is expected to give up his interests and follow the social norms that have already been established. In Africa, children are often viewed as disabled and reliant on adults for guidance and protection. They are expected to study hard and uphold social norms, leading to a stereotype of them as incomplete human beings with limited physical and cognitive development.

African culture limits children's physical, social, and cognitive development, requiring obedience to adult commands and preventing them from recognising their superiority. It is, therefore, forbidden for them to question or contest an adult's orders, regardless of whether they are suitable or not (Twum-Danso, 2009). According to Oppong (1973), children who challenge the authority of adults are likely to face bad outcomes such as early death, disease, or calamities. The study explores the deeply ingrained African notions of childhood and how these values are reflected in oral traditions, specifically proverbs. In the next section, we give a firm justification for using proverbs as our unit of analysis by defining what proverbs are and why their role in defining reality is so significant to Ghanaians.

On Proverbs

Proverbs function as a tool for constructing social reality, philosophy, worldview, and the customs and beliefs of certain African cultures (Gyan et al., 2020; Mariwah et al., 2022). African proverbs are significant cultural tools that embody the customs, history, beliefs, and values of a community, serving as primary records of folklore and social standards for societal well-being. According to Gyekye (1996), proverbs and other oral traditions are used as standards for determining absolute truth. As Awedoba (2000) posits, proverbs are so important in Ghanaian society that people do not question their authenticity or sincerity; consequently, questioning a proverb and its tenets is tantamount to questioning the wisdom of the ancestors. This would be deemed arrogance and a violation of the sacred, according to Awedoba. As a result, Africans see proverbs as objective realities and are, thus, particularly likely to adhere to their precepts in real-life situations.

Since it is usually a portrayal of social realities, researchers have attempted to uncover how social issues such as gender inequality are usually embedded in proverbs as well as how they manifest in real-life situations (Diabah & Appiah Amfo, 2015; Diabah & Amfo, 2018; Gyan et al., 2020; Dzahene-Quarshie & Omari, 2021; Mariwah et al., 2022). The current study, therefore, contributes to the academic discourse on how proverbs mirror societal realities.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Since critical pedagogy aligns with the principles of CDA, it was chosen as the analytical framework for the current study. Critical pedagogy aims to make children and society as a whole aware that they live in a suppressive environment where domination and authority are the norm (Clemitshaw, 2013; Bayoglu & Gumuseli, 2016; Amuzu, 2021). Through the application of CDA, we can learn how social structures are designed to continuously maintain power asymmetry and suppression. This framework, both theoretical and analytical, reveals the relationship between language and society. CDA is employed in the analysis of both transparent and opaque structural interactions pertaining to dominance, discrimination,

power, and control that are expressed through language (Wodak, 2004). This framework investigates how social injustices are deeply ingrained in a particular culture's language across various aspects of life, including politics, religion, and education.

CDA includes the objects of moral and political evaluation. Analysing them should have an effect on society by exposing power abuse, empowering the voiceless, and mobilising people to remedy social wrongs. In adopting this framework, we specifically refer to Richardson's (2007) three basic guidelines for analysing discourse. These include the exposition of (1) what language reveals about the society in which it was used, (2) the perceived influence of language use on people's social relationships in the society, and (3) the language's ability to either perpetuate or mitigate the continuation of unpleasant or oppressive social practices. Thus, in this study, we apply CDA to examine what Ghanaian society says—through the use of proverbs—about children's critical thoughts and how that could impact the implementation of critical pedagogy and the development of critical thinking in early childhood education.

Research Methodology

The approach to this study was purely qualitative. In all, 76 proverbs about children in various languages were gathered from four languages, including Akan, Dagaare, Ewe, and Ga. These proverbs came from both oral and published sources. The proverbs from Akan, specifically, were collected from *Bu Me Bɛ*, a book written by Appiah et al. (2007). Proverbs from Ga were also collected from Engmann's (2021) *Kpawo-kpawo toi kpawo abɛi (folklore of the Ga people)* book. As there are not many publications on proverbs in the other two languages (Dagaare and Ewe), the researchers had to rely on oral sources. Proverbs that specifically mentioned "child" and those that only addressed children in figurative form met our inclusion criteria. Proverbs that had the word "child" but did not depict childhood roles or the physical, mental, and emotional development of children were all eliminated. Although proverbs have underlying meanings and can be interpreted differently depending on the communication setting, the researchers were more interested in the proverbs' literal meanings and their historical contexts.

Results

The study's findings are presented and discussed in this section. The research is organized around three primary topics that demonstrate how childhood is viewed in the Ghanaian socio-cultural context. The analysis was centred on how proverbs are used to reflect child cognition, children's curiosity and aptitudes, and children's subservience in Ghana's sociocultural setting.

Construction of Childhood Cognition

In Ghanaian philosophy, childhood appears to be considered a period of human growth characterized by impaired reasoning, thus denying individuals or children the right to make thoughtful or helpful contributions to communication. The proverb presented below provides support for this argument.

> *(1) Akɔdaa nyansa ne panin deɛ nsɛ*   *(Akan)*
>   An elder's wisdom is not the same as that of a child.
>   (Appiah et al., 2007; p. 148, no. 3226)

The above proverb implies that the indigenous people of Ghana tend to consider age a reliable indicator of intelligence and critical thinking capacity. Older people are, thus, usually placed at the top of the intellectual hierarchy, despite our general understanding that age is not a valid indicator of intellect. There is, therefore, the tendency that the views of older people would be preferred to those of children, given the perceived life experience older people have. The foregoing argument is strengthened by Proverb (2).

> *(2) Ðevi ɖɔ ametsitsi kuku eƒe ta ɖe wóbuna ɖe eme*   *(Ewe)*
>   A child's face is never shown when s/he wears an adult hat.

The Ewe proverb (2) above metaphorically relates one's head to the size of his/her brain. The larger your head, the more wisdom you possess. It suggests, therefore, that an adult's hat is likely to obscure the eyesight of a child because adults have larger hats, which could impair the vision of a child when worn. The implication of this is that a child's and an adult's cognitive capacities are never comparable. In this regard, adults often assume children are incapable of societal functioning due to their cognitive limitations, as supported by proverbs.

> *(3) Akɔdaa nim adidi na ɔnnim asɛm ka*   *(Akan)*
>   A child is capable of eating but lacks self-expression skills.
>   (Appiah et al., 2007; p. 148, no. 3220)

> *(4) Akɔdaa nim wa bɔ na ɔnnim ahorɔ te*   *(Akan)*
>   A child is capable of coughing but not spitting.
>   (Appiah et al., 2007; p. 148, no. 3221)

> *(5) Gbekɛ lɛ, waa ejwaa, jeee akpokplonto*   *(Ga)*
>   A child can shatter a snail's shell, but not that of a tortoise.   (Engmann, 2021)

Several Ghanaian proverbs treat children as though they have very little knowledge. Proverbs 3, 4, and 5 characterise children as beings with shallow minds who are unable to ponder deeply. The word "child" can refer to any individual younger than the majority of a group performing a task, indicating that they cannot handle tasks requiring significant cognitive effort. As long as a person is relatively younger among a group, he is and will always be considered a child. In some discourse situations, 25-year-olds may still be considered children, suggesting that, traditionally, once you are the youngest among interlocutors, you would be, in most cases, expected to submit to elderly views.

Ghanaian Worldview of Childhood Curiosity

The Ghanaian National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NaCCA) emphasises a constructivist teaching philosophy, requiring students to actively explore new information and construct knowledge with minimal teacher guidance (Ampadu & Danso, 2018; Arioder et al., 2020). The Ghanaian perspective on children's knowledge conflicts with the need for children to have a strong sense of curiosity and a keen interest in hidden information. As can be observed in the sayings below.

> *(6) Akɔdaa repɛ adekɔkɔɔ ahwɛ a, yɛte damenama ahanhan kyerɛ no*
>   If the child wants to see a red thing, we show it the leaves of the Ashanti blood shrub.
>   (Appiah et al., 2007; pg149 no.3229)

(7) Akɔdaa su mpaanin su a yegye no ayieasetoɔ
  If a child cries like an adult, he contributes to the funeral expenses.
                                    (Appiah et al., 2007; pg149 no.3235)

(8) Akɔdaa bɔ mpanin bɛdɛ a, yɛsua no mpanin nnesua
  If a child designs an adult strap, he is made to carry adult loads.
                                    (Appiah et al., 2007; pg148 no.3201)

Some African children often attempt to surpass adult expectations, despite being considered weaker cognitively and physiologically. This behaviour among some children is usually considered an anomaly. The Akans, for instance, usually label a child who is overly inquisitive as akwalaabɔne (Bad Child). This signals that children are not expected to explore beyond their boundaries, as the proverb (6) suggests. In most civilizations, the colour red denotes peril. Because the Ashanti blood shrub has more red pigment and therefore more indication of risk, it should be displayed to a child who is drawn to danger. The impression given in Proverb (7) supports this opinion. Adults weep during Akan funerals in a way that is different from how a child would weep. The Akan culture values rich literature and uses literary techniques to pay tribute to the departed, a practice not usually expected of children. Children's excessive crying during funerals is known as suhunu (unnecessary crying). A child's attempt to mimic adult intelligence at a funeral may lead to unpleasant effects, as crying symbolises the pinnacle of maturity and intelligence. More so, as seen in (8), a child must always be forced to bear the weight of an adult whenever he tries to do adult-level work. This supports Smeryer's (2007, p. 2) assertion that, in the majority of educational environments, children's sensitivity and intelligence are "constantly thwarted by the obtuseness and neuroses of punitive adults."

Servitude

Drawing on the proverbs listed below, we further argue that most Ghanaian societies have an uneven power dynamic between adults and children. Children are expected to blindly follow the norms and instructions of their elders.

(9) Vi ɖi tɔ mewɔa tɔ nugbe o   *(Ewe)*
  A child may look like his father but cannot function exactly like him.
                                    (Oral source)

Proverb (9) shows that, as a youngster, you are always inferior to grownups. This is an empirically supported topic in the literature. Africans frequently violate the rights of children, particularly students. Sutherland (2014), for instance, has revealed that children's voices are constantly silenced in African early childhood classes. Children may have issues but cannot communicate them. Those who try are frequently penalized for being disrespectful. As Nthontho (2017) indicates, making a child's voice heard by adults is an unusual phenomenon in the African socio-cultural setting. Most African nations' socio-cultural beliefs frown on such freedoms. Respect for such sociocultural values, according to Sutherland (2014), is a fundamental reason why African children's human rights are continually restricted.

Discussions and Conclusion

Drawing on the results presented in the current study, we argue that social constructions of childhood in most Ghanaian cultures do not seem to provide opportunities for critical

thinking growth through critical pedagogy. The findings of the study suggest that the Ghanaian worldview seems to reject the training and upbringing of children democratically; hence, the possibilities for enacting critical pedagogy could be thwarted. This is because it is known that educational approaches that align with critical pedagogy are often discouraged in classrooms due to their deviation from African sociocultural norms (Ndofirepi & Cross, 2015; Nthontho, 2017). While critical thinking requires questioning conventional wisdom and established norms of society, our findings show that the Ghanaian culture, as reflected in the proverbs analysed, demands an asymmetric power relation between children and adults in all facets of life and human development.

The idea that children's opinions and rights are suppressed in the African environment has been challenged by more recent researchers, such as Wilson (2022). The author suggests that following superiors' orders in childhood does not necessarily mean marginalisation but rather a process of socialisation that instils a sense of social responsibility. Such a position is strongly opposed by earlier scholarly debates. Obeng (1998), for example, contends that obligations like respect and obedience endanger children's creativity and initiative because they are afraid to challenge these socio-cultural norms, which empower them to speak up on issues that affect them. Our finding lends weight to the arguments raised by Obeng. The findings show that the Ghanaian culture seems to perceive childhood as a human species with limited cognitive and physiological abilities. Hence, children are expected to submit to adult wisdom and directions. On this basis, we argue that there is a risk that children who are inclined to question the reliability of adult information may be silenced since that is not what the culture seems to expect of them. We further hypothesise that such cultural expectations could detrimentally affect the NaCCA's quest to develop children's critical thinking abilities. This argument is contingent on the fact that children are living in a somewhat suppressive cultural environment where their critical thoughts are disregarded and sometimes misconstrued as an act of disobedience and immorality. This affirms the assumption that a child's critical thinking skills could never grow in a society where children are not allowed to challenge presumptions and preconceived notions, among other factors (Rahimi & Sajed, 2014). On this basis, we recommend that an effective situational analysis be conducted before implementing educational innovations, emphasising the need to reject cultural norms that diminish children's talents and cognitive capacities.

Limitation of the Study

The major limitation of the current study is the inability to include proverbs from the many languages in Ghana. Further studies in other languages are therefore required to obtain a comprehensive view of how other cultures in Ghana construe childhood and how it could affect the development of critical thinking skills.

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