

Teaching Social Ethics in Early Childhood Classrooms: A Panacea for Promoting Peaceful Nigerian Society

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Abstract

Despite the attempts that have been made to promote justice and tranquility by international communities, and organisations as well as Nigerian government at national, state and local levels, evidence abound that the world and especially the Nigerian society still face various social problems like conflict, war, terrorism, declining work ethics, diminished civic responsibility, dishonesty and growing disrespect for elders among others. To overcome these problems, societies need to consciously inculcate the skills for promoting social ethics, early in young children. It is based on this premise that this paper argues that early childhood period is most effective and vital in inculcating skills for upholding social ethics in order to promote justice and peace in the Nigerian society. The paper discusses what social ethics means in early childhood, it discusses the process of inculcating the skills in early childhood classrooms and presents the implications such skills have for social and moral development of the Nigerian society.

Keywords: Social Problems, Social Ethics, Early Childhood Care and Education, Early Childhood Classrooms, Nigerian Society

1. Introduction

News about one social problem or the other is often reported by local and international newspapers, radio stations, television stations as well as online news media. To mention a few of these social problems, it is often heard, for instance, that armed gun men take innocent citizens lives at will, public figures embezzle fund entrusted in their care, political representatives engage in brutal fights in house of assemblies in front of international camera, same sex marriage and abortion are legalized, elders and legitimate authority figures are disrespected and disobeyed, dignity of labour becomes undignified, students perform poorly in internal and external examinations, civic responsibility is diminished, immoral acts gain prominence, innocent souls including children are killed for rituals or trafficked and poverty confront citizens. These problems, as a matter of fact, would not allow peace and justice to flourish in any society. This is why the present human societies, including Nigerian society, are stricken with varied degree of problems. It must be mentioned however that attempts have been made to overcome or curb these problems but despite these attempts by international communities as well as Nigeria at national, state and local levels, evidence abound to say that the world and especially the Nigerian society still face various degree of social problems. The question therefore is, “what other methods or means could be explored or emphasized in order to overcome these problems”?

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that is concerned with right and wrong of human behavior and the effects it has on society. It is a term that philosophers use to mean a philosophical study of morality. Morality here is understood as a set of social rules, principles and norms that guide or are intended to guide the conduct of the individuals in a society (Gyekye, 2010), and it is based on concepts of welfare, trust and justice (Oladapo, 2009). It is also understood as beliefs about right and wrong conduct as well as good or bad character. This informs the reason why morality is most often used interchangeably with “ethics”. It can further be said that ethics involves systematizing, defending and recommending concepts of right and wrong conduct. This is to say that ethics recommends how one should act or behave in the society in relationship with others and in the general society. Ethics exists in every human society. This is why it can be said that every society, be it literate or non-literate, developed or underdeveloped, has what can be referred to as social ethics. The reason for this is that the society is only expected to flourish when there is atmosphere of peace and tranquility, justice, trust, harmony, respect, love, care, tolerance, acceptance, cooperation, sharing and mutual understanding among others. Social ethics, which are the vehicle through which the society can enjoy a peaceful atmosphere, therefore are seen as moral principles that govern what is or is not acceptable social behaviors for members of a society.

In every society of the world and in Nigeria in particular, certain social ethics exist to guide the conduct and behavior of individuals in the society. Some of these ethics have been in existence since the traditional period in Nigeria and other African traditional societies. Among such ethics are respect, obedience, dignity of human labour, honesty, good character, fairness, cooperative living and justice among others (Gyekye, 2010). In the present era, social ethics could be said to be inclusive of the provisions in national constitutions and human rights documents of a nation. Summarily, it could be said that social ethics is based on the concepts of welfare, trust, justice, peaceful co-existence, tranquility, harmony, respect, love, care, tolerance, acceptance, cooperation, sharing and mutual understanding.

It should be noted however that every member of a society should be ethical if a society must be referred to as an ideal one. Being ethical here implies that every individual in the society should ensure that he or she accepts the principles of right and wrong and he or she conforms to the accepted standards of behavior in the society. But one wonders if individuals in the present human societies and especially in Nigerian society are ethical as Nigeria and other human societies are continually plagued with social problems. This could be the reason for Wilson’s (2008) submission that the teaching of ethical values does not seem to be happening, as evidenced by the behaviors and attitudes of many adults in our society. It is based on the foregoing that this paper argues that early childhood period is most effective and vital in inculcating skills which can help in promotion of justice and peace in the world and especially in the Nigerian society.

2. What Social Ethics Mean during Early Childhood Period

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is a wide range of programmes, activities and experiences which are planned to enhance the cognitive, social, emotional, moral and physical development of children. Kostelnik, Soderman and Whiren (2011) noted that it is any group programme that is designed to promote children’s intellectual, social, emotional, language and physical development and learning from birth to age 8. From the description of what ECCE means, it is glaring that one of the objectives to be achieved during early childhood period is to inculcate social and moral habits in children, hence, the need to inculcate social ethical skills in young children during this period. But, what exactly would children learn as social ethics or skills during early childhood period?

During early childhood period, children are discovering how to establish and maintain relationship with members of the group (Kostelnik et. al., 2011). Thus, they need to acquire skills which will enable them develop healthy social competence. The skills that children need to develop this social competence can be referred to as social ethical skills which if they acquire, will enable them promote ethics of their society during adulthood. The skills are embedded in social, emotional and moral domain of learning and they include peaceful co-existence, respect, love, care, tolerance, friendship, acceptance, cooperation, sharing, responsibility, helping, sympathizing, defending, rescuing, empathy and conflict resolution among others (Bredenkamp, 2011; Kostelnik et. al., 2011). This is to say therefore that when children learn these skills, they are learning social ethics because it is these skills that will enable them, later in life, to establish positive relationship with others, live within the bounds of societal expectations, perceive, interpret and respond to situations positively.

While contributing on the need to develop these social skills in children during early childhood period, Wilson (2008) noted that addressing the social problems will take more than the assumption or wish that children will just naturally evolve into caring adults who choose to make socially responsible decisions. The author therefore concluded that addressing our cultural and moral crisis will take the commitment and involvement of many elements of society, including early childhood education. In the view of Bredekamp (2011), building positive social skills and healthy emotional relationships during the early years is more effective than trying to remedy problems later. Authors have agreed to the fact that a child's high level of social competence in our society means that such child would exhibit responsible, independent, friendly, cooperative, purposeful and self-controlled behavior (McClellan and Katz, 2001; Goleman, 2006; Kostelnik et. al., 2011). Apart from these, researchers have reported that children who have better social skills and more positive social attitudes do better academically than less socially skilled children (Bryant, Barbarin, Burchinal, Chang, Clifford, 2005; Pianta, Howes, Burchinal, Bryant, Clifford, Early, 2005; Payton, Weissberg, Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Schellinger, and Pachan, 2008). All these expositions point to the fact that teaching social ethics during early childhood period is highly important and it has great and positive implications for the Nigerian society.

3. Teaching Social Ethics in Early Childhood Classrooms

According Kostelnik, et. al. (2011), children are not born knowing how to make friends or influence people and they are not born to automatically understand the rules and ethics of the society. Time and many varied experiences are necessary for them to master the skills required for successful social functioning (Kostelnik, Whiren, Soderman and Gregory, 2009). This means that teachers or caregivers need to guide children through various activities and experiences in order to help them develop social ethical behaviours needed for successful social functioning. This is particularly important because, as Independent Commission Against Corruption - ICAC (2007) puts it, there is a need to promote moral value education among the younger generation because we are observing a decline in standards of behaviour, attitudes and quality of relationships among people. The classroom functions as a "human relations laboratory" in which children explore social knowledge, concepts and skills through daily interactions, activities and on-the-spot instruction. To teach these ethical skills in early childhood classroom, this paper is of the opinion that teachers or caregivers should focus on promoting pro-social behaviour, friendship skills, conflict resolution skill, emotional literacy and positive attitude towards diversity.

Prosocial behaviour or skill is a set of activities performed by one, which are of benefit to other people or to the society as a whole. They include such activities as helping, co-operating, rescuing, defending, sharing, donating, volunteering, comforting, sympathy, kindness, giving, showing concern, and taking another person's perspective among others (Preusse, 2008; Kostelnik, et. al., 2011; Hyson and Taylor, 2011). According to Kostelnik et. al. (2011), pro-social behaviour represents the most positive attributes of society. There is no doubt that these activities or skills will give room for enabling environment where there will be peace and where everyone can be loved and cared for. To foster pro-social skills in children, the teacher or caregiver should help children make friends at school by using their names in activities or discussion, acknowledge the times when children exhibit the pro-social skills, make children identify who is present or absent, peer children for class activities or assignments, draw attention to the feeling of others, help children become more helpful and cooperative, guide children in showing sympathy, kindness, concern, feelings for others and ultimately model good pro-social behaviours.

At any age, having friends provides support and promotes mental health and wellbeing. Children's friendships are also very important for their social and emotional development. Through friendships, children learn how to relate with others because they develop social skills. Most children want to have friends. Children who have friends are more likely to be self confident than those without friends and they perform better academically in school. Children who are successful in making friends respond to conflict in positive ways, they are inclusive and more often express empathy and compassion (Stephens, 2007). As noted by Kostelnik et. al. (2011) and Stephens (2007), among other benefits, friends provide stimulation, sensitiveness, alertness, responsiveness, flexibility, assistance, companionship, social comparison and affection. The authors noted further that within friendship, children can experiment with a number of social roles such as leaders, follower, risk taker and comforter. To encourage friendship skills, the teacher or caregiver should help children interpret each other's intentions and behaviors, play games with them to learn about cooperation and taking turns, read stories about friendship, guide them to relate and listen to others and to show interest in what others have to say or are doing, praise children for being friendly and caring about others, give room for children's play with limited adult intervention, allow children direct their own play and offer opportunities to play with peers.

According to Vestal (2006), conflict naturally occurs in human interaction but if managed properly, it can be a very constructive avenue for needed change. The most complex aspect of peer relationship, according to Kostelnik et. al. (2011), is handling conflicts. Children's ability to deal with disputes in democratic ways such as recognizing and taking into account differences in another's viewpoint, compromising, bargaining, or suggesting non-violent solutions to problems is highly indicative of the future success of a relationship (Epstein, 2009). In resolving conflicts, children are expected to learn to express their rights, needs or feelings, listen to and acknowledge others' opinions and rights, suggest non-violent solutions to conflict, explain the reason behind the suggestion, accept reasonable disagreement and compromise on a solution (Kostelnik et. al., 2009; Kostelnik et. al., 2011). The teacher or caregiver is therefore expected to model the role of conflict mediator in disputes. The teacher should initiate the mediator role by stopping aggressive behaviour, solicit statements from each party, establish on neutrality, define problems or conflict in mutual terms, solicits ideas to resolve the conflict from each party, make children agree on the solution suggested by both ends, summarise point of agreement, praise children for developing own solutions to conflict and follow up through to help children carry out terms of agreement (Kostelnik et. al., 2009; Kostelnik et. al., 2011).

Emotional Literacy involves having self-awareness and recognition of one's own feelings and knowing how to manage them, such as the ability to stay calm when angered or to reassure oneself when in doubt. It includes empathy, i.e. having sensitivity to the feelings of other people. Joseph, Strain and Ostrosky (2006) submitted that emotional literacy is the ability to identify, understand and respond to oneself and others in a healthy manner. It has been said that emotionally literate people are able to employ self-discipline in order to harness their emotions, identify and reach their personal goals. Children who have strong foundation in emotional literacy are more likely to tolerate frustration, fight less and are less lonely and impulsive. In order to promote this skill in children, the teacher or caregiver should allow children to talk about their own feelings, talk out loud and label their emotions, use songs and rhymes, play games and read stories that introduce and reinforce feeling words, label children's feelings, help children talk about their own ways and other peoples' emotions, discuss acceptable ways of expressing strong feelings, narrate and describe ongoing interactions to help children develop vocabularies (such as unhappy, distraught, disturbed, disappointed, depressed, disgusted, dismayed, frustrated, annoyed, etc. to enable them find words to express their emotion) related to pro-social behaviours, draw children's attention to the feelings or experiences of others, at times using pictures or photo of people's faces, and model caring and positive regard for others (Bredenkamp, 2011).

Diversity relates to one's attitude toward knowledge of and experiences with people who are different from oneself (Kostelnik, et. al., 2011). Children's attitude about diversity have their roots in childhood, even before they are 3 years of age, they notice others' physical attributes and begin to compare these features with their own. Gonzalez-Mena and Pulido-Tobiassen (2013) are of the opinion that efforts must be made to prepare children to meet the challenges and reap the benefits of the increasingly diverse world they will inherit. The authors noted further that children must be raised to celebrate and value diversity and to be proud of themselves, their family traditions, respect and value people regardless of the color of their skin, their physical abilities, or the language they speak. Thus, building positive identities and a respect for differences is essential during early childhood period and this means weaving diversity into the fabric of children's everyday lives. To help children appreciate diversity, the teacher should plan multicultural activities that are integrated into the classroom activities rather than reserving them for holidays or special events; the teacher or caregiver should present children with opportunities to interact with adult members of their own and other cultural groups, individual who display varying physical abilities, older people and young people (Bredenkamp, 2011). For instance, the teacher could invite parents, grandparents and other older people in children's families and community to talk about their experiences while they were growing up. These people could also be made to tell children about traditional practices in their own culture.

4. Implications for the Nigerian Society

There is no doubt that the teaching of social ethics during early childhood period will have great and positive impact on the Nigerian society. This is particularly true because the children of today will soon grow to become adults later in life and they will be the ones to carry on the affairs of their society. The present situation in Nigeria is such that is critical and it does not seem that it will improve sooner. Pro-social behaviours are not evident in people's way of lives. There is lack of cooperation and understanding among people. Many who are highly placed are not ready to assist others and in most cases they fail to share their resources with the less privileged.

Lives of others are taken at will by some unscrupulous individuals and groups like that of Boko Haram, and there is growing less concern for peoples' plight. All these cannot be dissociated from the fact that there is lack of respect for social ethics. If Nigerian children are properly guided to learn pro-social behaviours during early childhood period, there is no doubt that they will work towards saving the Nigerian society from these social problems. This is because they will be ready to help and cooperate with others who have less opportunity. They will show kindness towards others, defend them, share resources with them and share their perspectives. When such situation exists, it is optimistic that the Nigerian society will flourish with peace and tranquility. This is why Kostelnik et. al. (2011) maintained that pro-social behaviour represents the most positive attributes of society.

In relation to friendship skills and emotional literacy, many in Nigerian society are left without support or affection. Consequently, they go into an oblivion state which some sociologists have referred to as "future shock". As a result, many have gone obviously insane because they do not have others to share their sorrows with. Apart from this, conflict continues to ensue between and among individuals and communities. People are not sensitive to one another. Political leaders fail to exhibit good qualities and expertise in discharging their duties as the citizens become more ungovernable. All these are related to social ethical problems which friendship can overcome. Therefore, a Nigerian child that has been taught friendship skills and emotional literacy during early childhood period will grow up to ensure that he shows love and affection towards others, he will ensure that conflicts are amicably resolved, exhibit good leadership skills if found in position of authority, show respect for elders and those in position of authority.

It has been said that conflict naturally occurs in human interaction but if managed properly, it can be a very constructive avenue for needed change. It is obvious that the Nigerian society does not enjoy what proper management of conflict can offer. This is why cases of conflict are rampant among individuals, communities and between government and some interest groups. This is why the Nigerian society must capitalize on ensuring that her children, right from the early childhood period, are taught the skills of conflict resolution. A Nigerian child that is taught these skills would work towards ensuring that the nation is free of conflicts. This is because the child, with the knowledge of conflict resolution acquired during childhood, would ensure that he deals with disputes in democratic ways by recognizing and taking into account differences in another's viewpoint, listening to and acknowledging others' opinions and rights, compromising, bargaining, and or suggesting non-violent solutions to problems.

At present in the Nigerian society, it is obvious that many do not appreciate diversity which comes in form religion, language, interests, ethnicity, abilities, values, gender role, life style, skin colour, culture, music and social class among others. This is why it is often heard in our society that Christians and Muslims are killing each other, that two communities in the same state are slaughtering themselves, that females are not treated with respect or sent to school and that people discriminate against one another. All these could be linked to a breakdown of our social ethics and values. The Nigerian society can get rid of the problems of non-appreciation of diversity if her children are taught early during childhood period to appreciate diversity. This is because such children would be ready to celebrate, accept and appreciate their own culture as well as that of others, they would be ready to respect and value others regardless of the colour of their skin, physical abilities or the language they speak.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

There is no doubt that Nigerian society, as well as other societies of the world, is facing varying degree of social problems. This is not far-fetched from the fact that societal ethics have been constantly overlooked or left to decay. In order to address these social problems as well as the moral crises that the Nigerian society is facing, there must be commitment and involvement of many elements of society, including early childhood education. Therefore, curriculum developers should review the current curriculum for the training of early childhood caregivers to prominently feature what social ethics are. Early childhood educators should therefore ensure that the training of pre-service Early Childhood Care and Education teachers emphasizes what social ethics are and how they can be taught in the classrooms. Apart from this, Nigerian early childhood professionals (including caregivers and early childhood educators) should be trained by the government with relevant agencies on what these social ethics are. The training should include how the social ethics can be fostered in children.

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