



An analysis of Jean Paul Sartre's view on childhood and human development: Implications for education practice in Cross River State

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Abstract

This paper explores the relevance of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy to educational practice, particularly within the context of Cross River State, Nigeria. Sartre's views on human freedom, self-determination, and the concept that "existence precedes essence" are employed as critical tools for examining prevailing assumptions about childhood and human development in education. This paper argues that the educational systems in Cross River State largely adopt deterministic and prescriptive models, inherited from colonial legacies and sustained by socio-cultural norms and rote learning practices. These approaches often reduce children to passive recipients of knowledge, neglecting their capacity for agency, critical reflection, and self-authorship. By analysing Sartre's ideas on freedom, responsibility, authenticity, and transcendence, the paper highlights the disconnect between existing pedagogical methods and the philosophical understanding of children as dynamic, self-defining beings. It proposes that education in Cross River State can be enriched by shifting toward a more existentialist framework—one that values dialogue, creativity, moral autonomy, and the recognition of learners as co-creators of meaning. The paper calls for practical reforms in teacher training, curriculum design, and classroom interaction, emphasizing the need for reflective, student-centred learning environments. The paper also addresses systemic barriers to this transformation, such as political instability, inadequate infrastructure, and resistance from conservative educational institutions. It contends that embracing Sartre's existentialist principles can serve as a catalyst for developing a more humane, responsive, and liberatory educational model. The paper reimagines education not merely as a tool for societal adaptation but as a transformative journey grounded in existential freedom, aimed at nurturing the holistic growth of every child.

Keywords: Existentialism, childhood agency, human development, educational reform, JP Sartre, Cross River State Education

Introduction

The interaction between philosophy and education offers a fertile ground for rethinking the purposes, processes, and practices of teaching and learning. Among the various philosophical traditions, existentialism, especially as articulated by Jean Paul Sartre, provides a radical critique of deterministic views of human nature and development. Sartre's central claim that "existence precedes essence" shifts the locus of identity from fixed essences to lived experiences and choices (Sartre, 17). This existentialist framework challenges the notion that children are born with predetermined potential or destinies and instead suggests that they are continuously in the process of becoming through their actions, decisions, and social interactions (Sartre, 10).

Education, in its ideal form, ought to be the cultivation of freedom, autonomy, and critical consciousness (Freire, 6). However, in many parts of the world—including Cross River State, Nigeria—education remains entangled with colonial legacies, cultural rigidities, and systemic inequalities that limit its transformative potential (Oladipo, 12; Okebukola, 2010) ^[8]. In such contexts, educational systems often reinforce conformity, obedience, and rote learning, leaving little room for personal agency or critical inquiry. This paper argues that a Sartrean philosophy of human development and freedom can offer profound insights into how education might better serve the growth

and liberation of individuals, especially children (Sartre, 40; Freire, 6).

Sartre's notion of human beings as radically free and responsible calls for an educational approach that fosters self-reflection, authenticity, and engagement with the world (Sartre, 40). In this framework, childhood is not a stage of deficiency or mere preparation for adulthood but a period of significant existential and moral development. Children are seen as capable of making meaningful choices and engaging with their environment in ways that shape their being (UNICEF, 23; Sartre, 45).

The case of Cross River State is particularly instructive for this discussion. As a culturally diverse region with a complex educational history shaped by missionary, colonial, and post-colonial influences, Cross River provides a microcosm of the broader Nigerian educational landscape (Cross River State Ministry of Education, 30). Despite significant progress in access to education, challenges persist in terms of curriculum relevance, teacher quality, infrastructure, and inclusive pedagogies (Okebukola, 2010; UNICEF, 2020) ^[8]. These challenges not only hinder academic achievement but also affect the moral and psychological development of learners.

This paper seeks to draw conceptual connections between Sartre's existentialist philosophy and the prevailing educational practices in Cross River State. It does so with the aim of proposing a more child-centered, freedom-oriented, and developmentally conscious approach to education. It begins with a brief biography of Sartre,

followed by a discussion of his views on childhood and human development. Next, it examines the nature of educational practices in Cross River State and proceeds to analyze the implications of Sartrean thought for transforming these practices. The paper concludes by offering recommendations for policy makers, educators, and curriculum designers.

This paper contributes to the ongoing dialogue on how philosophical ideas, particularly those centered on human freedom and self-creation, can inform more humane and effective educational systems. It calls for a re-imagining of childhood not as a passive phase of life but as a dynamic period of existential engagement, ethical formation, and developmental possibility.

Brief Biography of Jean-Paul Sartre

Jean-Paul Sartre was born on June 21, 1905, in Paris, France. A philosopher, playwright, novelist, political activist, biographer, and literary critic, Sartre became one of the most prominent figures in 20th-century French intellectual life. His early education took place at the Lycée Henri-IV and later at the prestigious École Normale Supérieure, where he was influenced by the philosophies of Immanuel Kant, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger (Cumming, 12).

Sartre's philosophy, rooted in existentialism and phenomenology, gained international recognition through his seminal works "Being and Nothingness" (43), "Existentialism is Humanism" (46), and a series of essays and novels including "Nausea" and the "Roads to Freedom" trilogy. He emphasized that human beings are condemned to be free, that is, they are thrown into existence without predetermined essence and must forge their identities through choices and actions (Sartre, 46).

His commitment to intellectual freedom and human rights led him to reject the 1964 Nobel Prize in Literature, stating that a writer should not allow himself to be turned into an institution. Sartre was also a politically engaged thinker, aligning with Marxist ideals while critiquing Stalinism and maintaining an emphasis on individual freedom over deterministic ideologies (Contat & Rybalka, 4).

Sartre's relationship with fellow philosopher Simone de Beauvoir was both personal and intellectual, shaping feminist and existentialist discourses for generations. Together, they championed a vision of freedom that transcended traditional moral and social boundaries, insisting that individuals are ultimately responsible for defining their own existence. Sartre died on April 15, 1980. His funeral was attended by tens of thousands, a testament to his impact on global thought. His legacy lives on in philosophy, literature, political theory, and education.

Childhood and Human Development

Childhood is widely recognized as a crucial stage of human development marked by rapid physical, cognitive, emotional, and social changes. Philosophers, psychologists, and educators alike have long debated the nature and implications of this stage for the formation of the human person. In existentialist thought, particularly that of Jean-Paul Sartre, childhood is not merely a preparatory phase for

adulthood but a fundamental existential moment where individuals begin the process of self-definition (Sartre, 46). Sartre contends that even though children are not yet fully conscious of their freedom, they are still active participants in their own becoming. In "Being and Nothingness," he posits that consciousness is always directed toward something, meaning that even young individuals are engaged in projects, albeit rudimentary, that reflect their interaction with the world (Sartre, 19). Childhood, then, is not a passive state but a dynamic engagement with one's environment.

Developmental psychology also supports the idea that children are not empty vessels but possess a growing capacity for agency and reflection. Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development emphasizes that children move through stages of increasingly complex thought processes, from sensorimotor activities in infancy to abstract reasoning in adolescence (Piaget, 19). Similarly, Lev Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) highlights the social nature of learning, proposing that children develop cognitively and emotionally through guided interaction with more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 78).

While Sartre's framework may differ in scope and methodology from those of Piaget and Vygotsky, they all converge on the notion that children are active participants in their own development. Sartre goes further by situating this development within a moral and ontological framework. He emphasizes that children, like adults, must take responsibility for their choices once they become aware of their freedom. This moral awakening is an essential aspect of human development and forms the bedrock of authentic existence (Sartre, 19).

Moreover, Sartre challenges the romanticized and deterministic views of childhood that often permeate educational and social structures. He warns against the temptation to see children as pure, innocent beings who must be shaped by adults into morally upright citizens. Instead, he advocates an approach that recognizes the child's inherent capacity for self-determination, even as they are nurtured and guided by others (Sartre, 46). In this light, childhood should be viewed as a time for exploration, creativity, and the gradual assumption of responsibility. Rather than being subjected to rigid norms and expectations, children should be encouraged to experiment with various identities, make choices, and reflect on their experiences. This approach aligns closely with progressive educational models that emphasize child-centered learning, experiential education, and moral reasoning (Montessori, 67; Dewey, 38).

Importantly, Sartre's views also invite us to reconsider the role of adults, such as parents, teachers, and caregivers—in the developmental process. Adults should not impose fixed values or predetermined paths on children but should instead create conditions that enable children to discover and affirm their own values. This pedagogical stance is rooted in respect for the child's freedom and the recognition of their existential potential (Freire, 19).

To sum up, Sartre's philosophy offers a compelling vision of childhood as an existential journey marked by freedom, choice, and moral awakening. It challenges deterministic

and essentialist views of human development, urging us to recognize the child as a conscious, responsible, and creative being. These insights have profound implications for how we design and implement educational systems, particularly in contexts where children's autonomy and developmental potential are often overlooked or suppressed.

Nature of Education Practice in Cross River State

Cross River State, located in the southeastern region of Nigeria, has a unique educational landscape shaped by historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors. From the colonial era to the post-independence period, education in Cross River State has undergone significant transformations. Yet, the current system continues to grapple with systemic challenges that hinder its ability to fulfill its developmental mandate (Cross River State Ministry of Education, 22).

One of the dominant features of the educational system in Cross River State is the prevalence of rote learning. In many public and private schools, the curriculum emphasizes memorization and regurgitation of information rather than critical thinking, problem-solving, or creativity (UNICEF, 20). Students are often evaluated based on their ability to recall facts rather than demonstrate understanding or apply knowledge in real-life contexts. This method of instruction stems partly from colonial legacies that prioritized obedience, discipline, and conformity over independent thought and critical inquiry (Fafunwa, 19). Despite reforms and new educational policies, the vestiges of this colonial model persist, contributing to a mechanistic and authoritarian classroom environment. Teachers are often seen as infallible authorities, while students are discouraged from questioning, challenging, or experimenting (Oladipo, 20).

Another challenge is the shortage of qualified teachers and inadequate infrastructure. Many schools in rural areas of Cross River State operate with limited resources, poorly trained staff, and insufficient learning materials (Okebukola, 10). This situation creates a learning environment that is not conducive to holistic child development. As a result, students often disengage from the learning process or drop out altogether, especially among marginalized populations. The curriculum also lacks relevance to the lived realities of students. Subjects are taught in isolation from students' cultural contexts, aspirations, or social conditions. This disconnects between school and life reinforces a sense of alienation and reduces the transformative potential of education (UNESCO, 21). Moreover, the curriculum rarely incorporates indigenous knowledge systems or moral and ethical reasoning, thereby limiting its capacity to nurture responsible and reflective citizens.

In terms of pedagogy, there is limited emphasis on experiential or participatory learning methods. Students are rarely given opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue, collaborative projects, or creative exploration. These deficiencies stifle the development of autonomy, self-confidence, and moral reasoning, all of which are central to Sartre's vision of human development (Sartre, 46).

Despite these challenges, there have been promising initiatives aimed at reforming education in the state. The Cross-River State Education Quality Assurance Initiative and partnerships with international organizations like

UNICEF have focused on improving teacher training, curriculum delivery, and access to education (Cross River State Ministry of Education, 22). However, these efforts need to be expanded and aligned with a broader philosophical vision of education that recognizes children as agents of their own development.

Thus, the nature of educational practice in Cross River State reflects a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and systemic factors. While some progress has been made, the system remains largely rigid, authoritarian, and disconnected from the developmental needs and aspirations of learners. To address these challenges, there is a need for philosophical reorientation, one that aligns with Sartre's existentialist insights into human freedom, responsibility, and self-creation.

An Analysis of Childhood and Human Development: Implications for Education Practice in Cross River State, Nigeria

The integration of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist principles into the understanding of childhood and human development offers a transformative lens for rethinking education in Cross River State, Nigeria. This section critically examines how Sartre's emphasis on freedom, choice, and authenticity can reshape educational philosophies, pedagogical practices, and policy decisions to better serve the developmental needs of children in the region.

Sartre's conception of the human being as a "being-for-itself" (*être-pour-soi*) who defines itself through choices offers a powerful framework for reconceptualizing the child not as an object to be shaped but as a subject in the process of becoming (Sartre, 43). In educational settings within Cross River State, children are frequently treated as passive recipients of fixed knowledge and cultural norms. This treatment is reflected in authoritarian classroom environments where conformity and obedience are prioritized over autonomy and critical thinking (UNICEF, 20).

However, Sartre's philosophy insists that human beings are not bound by essence or predestination. Even from childhood, individuals possess the capacity to transcend their situations through acts of will and imagination. This understanding calls for an educational approach that affirms children's agency and encourages them to take initiative, question assumptions, and engage creatively with the world. Such an approach would contrast sharply with current models of rote learning and passive absorption that dominate the region's educational landscape (Oladipo, 20).

Sartre's views on authenticity, that is, the alignment of one's actions with freely chosen values have profound implications for moral education. In Cross River State, moral instruction is often conducted in a didactic manner, with pre-packaged moral codes imposed on students rather than explored through critical dialogue. Sartre's insistence on self-authored values means that moral education must be dialogical and experiential, providing students with opportunities to confront real-life ethical dilemmas and reflect on their choices (Sartre, 46).

This resonates with Paulo Freire's notion of dialogical education, where students are co-creators of knowledge and moral insight rather than empty vessels to be filled (Freire, 19). By applying existentialist principles, educators can facilitate moral growth through classroom discussions, role-playing, literature, and community engagement projects that allow students to reflect on and construct their own values in interaction with others.

Sartre famously noted that human beings are "condemned to be free," a freedom that brings with it the burden of responsibility (Sartre, 19). This insight can radically alter how discipline and behavior management are approached in schools. Rather than imposing rigid rules and punishments, schools should foster an environment where students understand the consequences of their actions and learn to govern themselves. Teachers, instead of acting as enforcers, can become facilitators who help students explore the implications of their choices. This approach cultivates a sense of ownership over one's behavior and decisions, aligning with Sartre's vision of responsible freedom. Such strategies are essential in addressing behavioral issues in schools while promoting emotional intelligence and self-regulation (Montessori, 19).

The current curriculum in Cross River State often lacks relevance to the existential realities of students. Subjects are taught in abstraction from students' lived experiences, with little room for exploration of personal identity, social context, or future aspirations (Cross River State Ministry of Education, 22). Sartre's existentialism encourages a curriculum that is responsive to the individual student's situation and developmental needs.

Courses in literature, philosophy, and the arts can be restructured to include themes such as freedom, identity, alienation, and choice—issues that resonate deeply with Sartrean thought and with the realities faced by young people in Nigeria. Additionally, project-based learning, community service, and interdisciplinary modules can create pathways for students to integrate knowledge with action, thereby cultivating responsible and reflective citizens (UNESCO, 21).

The transformation of educational practice requires a corresponding shift in teacher training. Most teacher education programs in Cross River State focus heavily on content delivery and classroom management, with little emphasis on philosophical foundations or developmental psychology (Okebukola, 10). Incorporating existentialist principles into teacher education can help teachers become more attuned to the complexities of human development and the ethical dimensions of teaching.

Teachers trained in existential pedagogy would approach the classroom not as a site of control but as a space for mutual growth. They would learn to see their students not as problems to be managed but as fellow human beings engaged in the project of becoming. This orientation fosters empathy, critical reflection, and a deep respect for the individuality of each learner (Freire, 19). A major challenge in applying Sartre's ideas in Cross River State is the tension between existential freedom and communal cultural values. Sartre advocates for individual autonomy, while African societies, including those in Cross River, often emphasize communal responsibility and conformity to social norms

(Gyekye, 19). However, this need not be a zero-sum conflict.

Existential freedom can be harmonized with communal values through an emphasis on intersubjectivity—the recognition that one's freedom is realized in relation to others. This relational understanding of freedom allows educators to respect cultural values while also encouraging personal authenticity and moral independence. Educational practices that promote dialogue between traditional wisdom and modern critical inquiry can help students navigate this balance constructively (Wiredu, 19).

A Sartrean reimagining of education demands systemic changes beyond the classroom. Policymakers must recognize that education is not merely about economic productivity but about human development in the fullest sense. This requires investments in teacher training, infrastructure, curriculum reform, and inclusive policy frameworks that prioritize the well-being and agency of learners. Moreover, existentialism emphasizes the unpredictability and openness of human development. Educational systems should therefore be flexible and adaptable, capable of responding to the diverse and evolving needs of students. This means decentralizing education governance, encouraging school-level innovations, and involving communities in decision-making processes (UNESCO, 21).

By bringing Sartre's existentialist philosophy into dialogue with the educational realities of Cross River State, this section has illustrated the transformative potential of viewing children as autonomous, self-defining agents. Such a perspective challenges the dominant deterministic and authoritarian models of education and offers a compelling vision of learning as a liberatory process. Embracing this vision can lead to more humane, responsive, and empowering educational practices that align with the true purpose of education: the unfolding of human freedom and dignity.

Conclusion

Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy offers a profound and provocative lens for rethinking childhood, human development, and educational practice. His core ideas, freedom, responsibility, authenticity, and self-definition challenge deterministic and prescriptive views of education that continue to dominate systems such as that of Cross River State. This paper has traced the implications of Sartre's thought from the ontological understanding of childhood as a period of emergent freedom to the practical transformations needed in pedagogical approaches, curriculum design, teacher training, and policy formulation. It has demonstrated that children are not passive entities to be shaped, but active participants in their own becoming, whose development is best nurtured through educational environments that respect their autonomy, encourage moral reflection, and cultivate critical consciousness. In Cross River State, educational reform remains urgent considering persistent challenges such as rote learning, outdated curricula, inadequate teacher preparation, and infrastructural deficits. Integrating Sartrean principles into these reforms offers a philosophical foundation for change that is both humanistic and transformative. Such integration will require

not only institutional changes but also a cultural shift in how educators, parents, and policymakers conceive of children and their developmental potential. Ultimately, the relevance of Sartre's ideas transcends the classroom. They speak to the broader human aspiration for freedom, dignity, and self-realization. In applying these principles to education, we do not only improve learning outcomes—we cultivate the next generation of free, responsible, and authentic human beings.

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