

INDIGENOUS PHILOSOPHIES OF EDUCATION AND CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Much has already been written about the philosophy of education which most of the times are from the west. In recent times, the eastern philosophies of education are also gaining attention. However, this paper attempts neither to look towards the west nor towards the east but from among and from within the cultures, that is, the indigenous philosophies of teaching and learning. The study investigates some indigenous educational philosophies from Africa, North America, Australia, and the Philippines through a review of the literature. A list of common elements of indigenous philosophies was lifted. These are *terrestrialism, communitarianism, oraliticism, preparationism, perennialism, holisticism, deconstruction-reconstructionism, and practicalism*. These principles were paralleled with Religious Education and possible applications on enriching philosophies on Christian education were discussed.

Keywords: *Philosophy of education; Indigenous philosophies of education; Christian education*

INTRODUCTION

The philosophy of education embraces dictates the direction of the whole learning and teaching processes, its curriculum, assessment, and teacher formation. Traditionally, in the formerly colonized society, the stakeholders of the educational system continue to follow the colonizers view on education (Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru and Makuvaza, 2014; Bulatao, 1965; Matemba, 2005; Petrovic and Mitchell, 2018). Many studies and movements now are calling for a space towards considering the cultural perspective of the beneficiaries of these educational undertakings. Bhabha (2009) calls this the *third space*. This is when both the Western and indigenous forms of knowledge could collaborate with one another fostering a creative tension of hybridity which encourages creative synergies in an intercultural encounter (Stewart, 2018). Thus, this paper invites everyone to consider indigenous philosophies of education and the principles and practices that come with them in rethinking the way education is done particularly in Christian education. An indigenized philosophy of Christian Education is possible through contextualization that respects both the culture of the people and the values of Christianity.

Philosophy of education refers “to the goals and aims and objectives towards which educational systems and practices are directed. It is concerned with the means to arrive at concrete solutions to the various problems in the educational system and in the society as well” (Duka, 1989, p. 8). It is also seen as the guiding spirit or principles which serve as the very foundation of educational systems (Duka, 1989). Dupuis and Gordon (1997) see educational philosophy as a statement of beliefs about education and how to tackle major topics within the educational system such as students, curriculum, assessment, and discipline etc. In helping one to define one's educational philosophy, Dupuis and Gordon (1997) ask the following questions: What is man? How do we know? What is the truth? What is good? What is the purpose of the school? What should be taught? How should one teach? How students should be evaluated? How are freedom and discipline to be harmonized? Answers to these questions can lead one to formulate his or her own philosophy of education.

In most, if not all, of the formerly colonized societies, the educational philosophies are heavily influenced by Western thoughts. However, western traditions on educational philosophy have not been able to find a stable basis upon which to rest its aims of education (Siegel, 2018). On the other hand, the Eastern philosophies of education are rooted in the great religious traditions of the east: Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, etc. These traditions are as old as the West but unlike the western traditions, eastern traditions show more stability and more resistant to cultural change brought about by western traditions.

Indigenous Philosophy of Education

Stewart (2018, p. 741) defines indigenous as the “notion of a placed based human ethnic culture that has not migrated from its homeland and is not a settler or colonial population.” Indigenous then is often presented opposite the Western or Euro-American worldview. It can easily refer to the people, to the practices and crafts and culture and life of the people in general. Education is also a vital aspect of indigeneity and in this aspect, the West and the indigenous presents a wide difference between the two. “Education is based on knowledge and the key difference between Western and indigenous knowledge is at the level of philosophy” (Stewart, 2018, p. 742). Thus, as a reaction to Western colonization and influence, indigenous communities use education to reclaim and regenerate their culture particularly their languages, their stories, their histories and wisdom traditions (Stewart, 2018).

The UNESCO has been very active in promoting the use of indigenous education by publishing documents that are related to the development of indigenous peoples and introducing indigenous knowledge and its applications. UNESCO (2010) even came up with a curriculum on environmental sustainability built upon indigenous knowledge. It has distinguished the indigenous education from the formal western or scientific education. According to UNESCO (2010), indigenous education happens when a community elder teaches or hands down practical knowledge of culture, the environment and survival of the tribe through demonstrations and through a wide range of ceremonies stories, songs, village meetings, and taboos. Formal education, on the other hand, was introduced to many developing countries through colonial governments to produce administrators, clerks, teachers, and interpreters. This type of education was based on abstract knowledge systems that evolved in the western industrialized world.

In the same document, UNESCO (2010) describes the indigenous view of knowledge to include the spiritual, wherein the sacred and the secular come together. It is holistic and integrated where the view of knowledge is based on a whole systems approach. Also, indigenous knowledge is stored orally and in cultural practices. The validity and predictability of knowledge are highly localized (ecological validity) and might be less valued in other areas. An example of this is the different expertise among highlanders, lowlanders, and sea or river siders. Indigenous learning objectives lean towards imbibing long-term wisdom for cultural and ecological sustainability. Learning deals more on practical usage in everyday life. An important aspect of the learning objectives among indigenous peoples is the integration of critical thinking and cultural values in decision making. Finally, indigenous methods of teaching and learning are characterized by lengthy periods of acquisition, learning through experience, teaching through example, modeling, ritual, and storytelling and tested in practical life situations.

UNESCO (2010) differentiates these from the formal education wherein the view of knowledge is purely secular and often excludes the spiritual. Formal education focuses on analytical or reductionist – based on sub-sets of the whole. Knowledge is stored in books and computers. However, it uses natural principles that have powerful predictability (rational validity), but weak in the local use of knowledge. In terms of learning objectives, formal education focuses on short-term recall to pass examinations, economic sustainability and in the use of logical and critical thinking in making decisions. The method is typified by rapid acquisition, learning by formal education teaching through abstract concepts and didactic methods and tested artificially in examinations.

Mika and Stewart (2018), after reviewing several articles on the nature of indigenous philosophies of education and the struggles of their adherents against the influence of the Western view, aptly summarizes the core of the indigenous philosophy of education in two points. First is that the indigenous philosophy of education is closely linked with the indigenous people's well-being. Second is that education for the indigenous peoples goes beyond teaching and learning.

Indigenous Philosophies of Education

Based on the definition provided by Stewart (2018), one can say that there is not one philosophy of indigenous education to cover all. Each indigenous group has its own view of looking at life and at education as well. Their conception of the human person, of truth, of teaching and learning, should be analyzed per group. This paper surveyed some representative descriptions of indigenous philosophies of

education from Africa, North America, Australia, and the Philippines and, apparently, there are commonalities among these practices with regards to education. However, the more common these philosophies are, the more different they become in specifics.

In Africa, Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru and Makuva (2014) argue for the restoration of *Hunhu* or *Ubuntu* as the central philosophy of education in Zimbabwe. In the *hunhu* philosophy, human dignity forms the heart of education and it aims towards an education that nurtures universal kinship with all human beings. It recognizes the interconnectedness of beings thus resulting in “respect for other persons that should promote social well-being through the development of interpersonal skills in learners” (Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru and Makuva, 2014, p. 12).

Ashu (2016) listed several key principles of the indigenous philosophies of African education: preparedness (children are prepared to take roles for the tribe in the future); functionalism (child work as they learn and learn as they work); communality (acquisition of common spirit to work and life, thus produce were owned communally); holism (jack of all trades and master of all); perennialism (the need for children to learn to perpetuate their knowledge and culture).

In the United States, Ilarion Mercurieff and Libby Roderick of the University of Alaska Anchorage has published in 2013 a book entitled *Stop Talking: Indigenous ways of teaching and Learning and Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education*. This is a documentation of their experience of training a group of faculty members from different colleges in the ways of indigenous teaching and learning. This eventually became a program that university teachers around the US can participate to have a deeper understanding, appreciation and practice skills in indigenous education. The book has listed down indigenous ways of teaching and learning among the Alaskan natives: earth-based paced, attending to relationship, place-based knowledge/learning from the earth, learning/thinking/working as a group, learning from elders, close observation and emulation, indirect teaching, silence/pausing/ reflecting, all sense experiential learning, visual/non-verbal learning, storytelling, dance and games, good instructions, and humor.

Another important work on indigenous education is Cajete's (1994) *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education*. It explores and outlines the key elements of American Indian's perspectives on education and the teaching and learning process. It focuses on the relationship of the community to their geography, their land. The relationship to the place or places of their ancestors and to all living things that live in it forms the central sense of the sacred in these cultures. It also provided quite a long list of educational processes and practices in the American Indian tribes. One specific highlight of the book is on how the traditions are passed on through story-telling and proverbs.

In Australia, www.indigenousteaching.com was created to make resources available for those applying these teaching styles to various classroom experiences. From the website, one can download a booklet prepared by Dr. Christine Asmar entitled *Indigenous Teaching at Australian Universities: Research-based Approaches to Students and Indigenous Curriculum*. The book, *Growing up Indigenous: Developing Effective Pedagogy for Education and Development* by Raymond Nichol, published in 2011, also describes the need for an indigenous pedagogy that integrates traditional knowledge with modern education for Australian and Melanesian audiences. Yunkaporta (2009) listed down eight ways of Australian aboriginal pedagogies. These are: story sharing (approaching learning through narrative), learning maps (explicitly mapping/visualizing processes), non-verbal (applying intra-personal and kinesthetic skills to thinking and learning), symbols and images (using images and metaphors to understand concepts and content), land links (place-based learning, linking content to local land and place), non-linear (producing innovations and understanding by thinking laterally or combining systems), deconstruct/reconstruct (modeling and scaffolding, working from wholes to parts), and community links (centering local viewpoints, applying learning for community benefit).

In the Philippines, the CBCP-Episcopal Commission on Indigenous People (2008) consolidated and published a report on the state of indigenous education in the Philippines. There, the Commission described what worked and did not work with the previous attempts and how they were adapting to the concerns. Part of the report was a brief description of the philosophy in conducting indigenous education

in the Philippines. For them, the main objective for educating the indigenous Filipinos is “to nurture their sense of identity/indigenous personhood and to instill competencies and learning process both from their system and the mainstream to enable them to assert their rights and self-determination” (CBCP-ECIP, 2008). And this objective should be founded upon culture (as process and product), history (life-stories woven into the tribe’s history, woven into the bigger story of nation and the world), heritage (a sense of being a descendant and ancestor) and spirituality (expression of faith life, values and beliefs) (CBCP-ECIP, 2008).

The document also affirms that the teaching and learning processes include revealed knowledge, the ancestral domain, the elders as teachers, the use of tribal language and the community teaching-learning processes complemented by mainstream ones. In the indigenous community, learning happened within the whole ancestral domain – in the home, in the fields, the rivers, during walks, hunting, planting, etc. In some tribes, there are specific learning venues where the youth gather and interact with the elders to learn about their community practices and dynamics. The source of knowledge is not a person but the ancestral domain or creation and everything in it. Another unique teacher and source of knowledge are their “dreams.” Some tribes learn how to cure diseases with herbal medicines, create designs for weaving and other knowledge through dreams (Fiag-oy, 2005; Paterno et al, 2000). Thus, dreams for them are revealed knowledge (Steinhauer, 2002).

For the indigenous, the main repository of knowledge are the elders. Their memories are the library of indigenous communities. Knowledge is also stored in songs, chants, dances, rituals, and day to day activities of the tribe. There is also a theory that knowledge is stored in “cellular memory” (Steinhauer, 2002). An example of this is the competency, which evolved through the centuries of making rice terraces, of indigenous communities of the Cordillera Mountains to work with rock, mountains, and soil (CBCP-ECIP, 2008).

As a way of synthesizing the different elements of the indigenous philosophy of education from various sources and places, one could see the common elements which can well explain it. These common elements are *terrestrialism*, *communitarianism*, *oraliticism*, *preparationism*, *perennialism*, *holisticism*, *deconstruction-reconstructionism*, and *practicalism*.

- a. *Terrestrialism* is best exemplified by Cajete (1994). The land is the source of all that is to be learned and life highly depends on the land. The connection and rootedness of the indigenous people to their land clearly define their identity as a people. The land also, particularly in some special places, is where the seen and unseen spirits can come together. The land is the indigenous peoples’ home, school, and source of livelihood. It is the dwelling place of the spirits, their teacher, their mother, their identity, and their everything. The land for them is sacred and more than a source of living, it is their life. It is the one which defines their existence, their worldview. It is their fundamental principle in defining what it is to be human.
- b. *Communitarianism* refers to the importance given on the tribe to ensure total human development. This is best exemplified by the concept of *Hunhu* or *Ubuntu* among the African indigenous peoples. Each member of the tribe is defined by the way one relates to one another. This sense of belongingness and solidarity with one another provides the background for a true community that gives importance to the least, the last and the lost members of the community. It stands in the middle of the Western views of communism and liberalism, where there is a sense of balance between the individual person’s development with that of the good of the tribe. The primacy of the tribe or community highlights the sense of communion and mutual support with each other. Clans and family gather in tribes and try to maintain a smooth relationship with each other. They gather together at planting, hunting, harvesting, during the meal, during celebrations, etc. They gather when there is something to discuss and decide upon. They come together to teach or to learn. The sense of belongingness in a clan or tribe is very strong among the indigenous peoples.
- c. *Oraliticism* refers to the oral transmission of culture and life among indigenous peoples. This is done through story-telling, proverbs, and sayings, songs, and poems. Primarily, this role of

transmission or passing-on of the culture and tradition fall upon the shoulders of the elders. The elders are considered the closest person to the ultimate source of indigenous knowledge, the ancestors. And the ancestors are the ones closest to the vault of knowledge, the whole of creation itself. The elders are recognized and respected because of this. They are known to have the wisdom and integrity and their grasp of the traditional knowledge is unparalleled. They are sought for their wisdom and knowledge and are consulted for their insights and ideas about life, in general, affecting the person, family, and the tribe or community. The stories and songs are about life, their relationship with nature, the rivers, the mountains, on ethics and values, on responsibilities, on spirituality etc. They will tell these stories repeatedly for as long as they can, knowing that the listeners will eventually take their place and become elders themselves in the future.

- d. *Preparationism* is the educational principle that considers the importance of preparing the children in taking on future responsibilities. Children are expected to learn the necessary skills to perpetuate the tribes. In some indigenous groups, boys and girls are prepared according to their gender-based roles. In Africa for example, the girls are prepared to becoming mothers, wives, and home-makers, while boys are trained to become warriors, manual farmers, good head of the family (Ashu, 2016).
- e. *Perennialism* is related with preparationism but this one focuses on the broader perspective that is the perpetuation of the people's culture and knowledge. This is also related to conservationism, this is a principle of education that promotes the preservation of indigenous knowledge, beliefs, and systems against the influence of other worldviews. Learners are viewed as passive recipients for them to receive the traditions fully in its unadulterated form to pass this on to the next generation. This educational principle helped preserved many indigenous communities their original way of life.
- f. *Holisticism* refers to the inter-connectedness of all things, both and among the living and non-living. The individual person is connected with the community and the community is connected with nature (Durst, 2004). "All forms of life are inseparably connected to each other...cycles and circles are the prominent metaphors of life and reality, rather than linear and hierarchical models" (Schroder, 2006, p.309). Because of this, no indigenous learner would want to present oneself as better or worse. In learning, competition is not the motivation. Rather, cooperation is the preferred learning strategy. This is highlighted by the indigenous learners' preference towards unity, harmony and simple oneness (Pewewardy, 2002).
- g. *Deconstruction-Reconstructionism* basically is learning by modeling and imitation. The children from the very young age were already taught the ways of life through demonstration. Yunkaporta (2009) sees this as working from wholes to parts, from watching and doing. In this sense, this is an assessment method in measuring the child's learning and mastery of a craft. Through modeling and imitation, the children learn the ways and means to survive in the tribe.
- h. *Practicalism*, finally, refers to the utilitarian view of learning, i.e. learning while working and working by learning. Ashu (2016) consider the utility value of education, that learning is practical and should be useful to one's daily life. This is important for the children, in their rites of passage to become an adult member of the community, to be inducted into the real life of the society.

Ozmon (2012, p, 1) best summarizes what has been considered so far: "Philosophy of education begun when people first came to know of education as a distinct human activity. Indigenous societies did not have complicated view on education as we know them now but at least, they have a philosophical attitude about life."

Implications of Indigenous Philosophy of Education to Christian Education

Christian Education is tasked to develop harmoniously the persons' physical, moral and intellectual endowments so that they may gradually acquire a mature sense of responsibility in striving endlessly to form their own lives properly and in pursuing true freedom as they surmount the vicissitudes of life with courage and constancy. (GE # 1)

However, more than developing young people towards maturity in all aspects of life, Christian education also has this as its principal goal:

That the baptized, while they are gradually introduced the knowledge of the mystery of salvation, become ever more aware of the gift of Faith they have received, and that they learn in addition how to worship God the Father in spirit and truth (cf. John 4:23) especially in liturgical action, and be conformed in their personal lives according to the new man created in justice and holiness of truth (Eph. 4:22-24); also that they develop into perfect manhood, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ (cf. Eph. 4:13) and strive for the growth of the Mystical Body; moreover, that aware of their calling, they learn not only how to bear witness to the hope that is in them (cf. Peter 3:15) but also how to help in the Christian formation of the world that takes place when natural powers viewed in the full consideration of man redeemed by Christ contribute to the good of the whole society. (GE #2)

One can consider this as the educational philosophy of the Catholic Church. The Church aims for the total human development of her children. The formation of every member to be a man or woman of faith, able to witness and share their faith as they actively involve themselves in proclaiming the Gospel in the practice of their profession and contribute to the good of the society they are in.

The Church recognizes the parents as the primary and principal educators of their children (GE #3). However, the Church also encourages other institutions to help the parents fulfill their roles and the most prominent of these institutions are the schools (GE #5).

Mika and Stewart (2018), as one may recall, consider the well-being of the person and the education that goes beyond teaching and learning to be the core of indigenous educational philosophy. Also, earlier in this paper, a list of possible essential principles and elements of an indigenous educational philosophy was presented. Putting all these, vis-à-vis the educational philosophy of Christian education enshrined in *Gravissimum Educationis*, we can see some semblances and differences that may pose as challenges in doing Christian education.

First, the end goal laid out by both are quite the same: the promotion of the total well-being of the human person, development in all aspects of life. However, for the indigenous, this well-being does not only refer to the individual person. It refers to the well-being of the whole tribe, the land they are occupying, and all the living and non-living elements found in their ancestral land. In a sense, the well-being of a person for an indigenous community is measured not only of the physical, emotional, psychological social, and moral attributes of a person but of the general condition of his or her surroundings. This also relates to the principle of terrestrialism. The health of the land conditions also the health of the people inhabiting it.

However, in Christian Education, terrestrialism is not enough. In as much as we relate to the environment, the Church teaches that it is futile to cling into this world that perishes. The true home for a Christian is not of this world but in life everlasting with God in heaven.

In preparationism and perennialism, however, one can find the strong similarity between the indigenous philosophy of education and that of Christian education. From a very young age, both prepare their children to assume a responsibility to their respective community in the future. The children are also expected to promote the culture and protect it as much as they can to pass it on to the next generation.

In holism, which, for the indigenous, pertains to the interconnectedness of the human person with this or her community and with the land and all that is in it, on it and above it. However, only recently, the Church has strengthened her voice to speak of the earth as our common home. Therefore, this relationship with the environment was not given emphasis in *Gravissimum Educationis*. The document simply focused on intra-relationship and interrelationships among men and women and with God. Every person is called to pursue his or her ultimate end and the good of the societies where he or she belongs (GE #1).

Learning by imitation is also very important in passing-on of the faith in Christian Education. The young people are watching and imitating the adults in living out their Christian faith. For among the indigenous, deconstruct-reconstructionism is a method of passing-on, not just the faiths and beliefs, but also the way of life among the people in the tribe. *Gravissimum Educationis* encourages the state, the family and the Catholic schools in providing the young people an opportunity and environment to grow into men and women of faith who will actively contribute to the welfare of the whole of society. Thus, parents, teachers and those in church and civil authorities have the responsibility to be positive role models for the young learners.

Practicalism is essential in religious education as well. However, this could be the Waterloo of Christian education if not properly delivered. Religious education, especially in higher education, can easily be set aside in favor of "major" subjects. Nonetheless, it serves as a challenge in rendering religious education by making it relevant to the life of the students.

From these parallelisms, one can see that the indigenous philosophy of education can effectively enrich the educational philosophy presented in *Gravissimum Educationis*. On the other hand, Christian educational philosophy can also provide a more transcendental meaning to the indigenous philosophy of education.

CONCLUSION

The essential role of educational philosophy is recognized in any educational activity. It provides the directions, the ends, the goals of any educational endeavor. Discussions on the philosophy of education, however, are efforts to "expand our horizon of possibilities by considering alternative goals and ideals that might never have occurred to us" (Phillips, 2010).

This paper explored the *third space*, as Bhaba (2009) puts it, wherein the indigenous philosophies of education were placed vis-à-vis the philosophy of the Church as presented in *Gravissimum Educationis*. One could conclude that there is not one indigenous educational philosophy. The more indigenous cultures are compared, the more they become alike and different at the same time. However, this paper recognized that there are some elements of indigenous educational philosophies that gravitate towards some common themes despite the differences in their expressions by the different indigenous groups.

Furthermore, one could not easily say that the indigenous educational philosophies are much better than that of the Christian educational philosophy as presented in *Gravissimum Educationis*, and vice versa. Each one has its own strengths and weaknesses that, in more ways than one, tend to complement each other.

This complementarity between and among these indigenous educational philosophies with the Christian educational philosophy opens possibilities of enriching both sides. As an example, since it is the goal of indigenous education for the human person to be in complete communion, not just with their fellow humans but with the whole of creation itself, which the Christian educational philosophy as per *Gravissimum Educationis* lacks, the Christian educational philosophy nonetheless provides a template on how to be in communion with not just with the whole creation, but with God who is the author and source of everything.

Informing each other can provide for an educational philosophy that touches not just the heart

and mind of the human person, but also the person's indigenous ancestral memory. And at these points of convergence, a critical dialogue between and among these educational philosophies can produce a new synthetic and wholistic philosophy of human and Christian education that can bring about the next generation into a higher level of existence.

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