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The Importance of Incorporating Philosophy into Early Childhood Education in South Africa

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## The Importance of Incorporating Philosophy into Early Childhood Education in South Africa

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study was to evaluate the importance of incorporating philosophy into early childhood education in South Africa.

**Methodology:** The study adopted a desktop methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low-cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

**Results:** The study found that philosophy is first introduced at the university level of education in South Africa and so the system does not maximize on the magnitude of benefits that can be accrued from exploring philosophy intensively and consistently from an early age.

**Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy:** The study recommends that there is need to introduce philosophy for children at the basic level of education so as to promote the development of vital thinking skills and improve on the quality of education.

**Keywords:** *Early Childhood Education, Philosophy for Children.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Several studies demonstrate that the education sector is struggling to help students gain the skills they need to become responsible, contributing members of society. Studies on education that were commissioned by the government tended to emphasize the role that education plays in promoting national unity. Lifelong education and adaptability to new circumstances were also areas that may be strengthened. In particular, the latter papers highlight how the South African educational system falls short in providing students with the tools they need to effectively assimilate new knowledge and adjust to an ever-evolving global context. Poverty, unemployment, violence, and rising corruption are just some of the development challenges still plaguing South Africa, according to a survey by The Institute for Policy Analysis and Research (2018). These problems may have resulted from a failure to think critically and creatively about the issues at hand.

Philosophy for children originally developed by Lipman, a philosophy professor at Montclair State College in New Jersey, in the 1970s is a programme that studies children's natural curiosity and then use it to help them in their quest to find meaning by encouraging intellectual courage and development of good judgement in their daily lives. While it is true that philosophy for children is a thinking programme, it does much more by building children's astonishment and inquisitiveness on ideas that are important to them. The subject matter is the concepts that reinforce both our understanding of human life and all theoretical disciplines such as: friendship, truth, certainty, evidence, liberty, reason, fairness, god, self, human nature, rules, responsibility etc. through stories, pictures and charts formulated to trigger and encourage thinking. Through philosophizing where learners engage collaboratively in thinking processes for knowledge construction, values such as: intellectual tolerance, courage and humility that bring about responsibility, fairness and justice are developed. It may also contribute to holistic development of individuals and broaden general outlook of issues; understanding freedom so as not to misuse it, but to use it responsibly. The enquiry technique of philosophy is significant as comprises of people purposefully taking part in the critical analysis and reflect on issues to construct individual meaning and then confirm mutual understanding. This may encourage opening up of all learners through questions and discussions without fear and learning that different ideas may be of value enriching the learning experience. The chance to voice each person's views will improve understanding of people and reduce tension that can help reduce cases of vandalism, drug addiction and other stresses.

Wachira (2019) argues for a standardization and enhancement of South Africa's educational system in order to better ensure that students are receiving an education that is both relevant and of high quality. According to Nasongo (2021), educational institutions are often criticized for teaching irrelevant material, making it difficult for students to adapt to the rapidly evolving, technologically advanced world of today. According to Chaffee (2015), the risk of what is taught as foundational information in schools quickly becoming obsolete has increased due to the high rate at which human knowledge has expanded in recent years. This shows that, as times evolve, the information provided to students may become irrelevant or insufficient. Therefore, in order for students to thrive in the information-based economy of the 21st century, instruction must emphasize the development of analytical and innovative thinking skills. This is why the IPAR



(2018) and other recent policy efforts have made improvements to education's quality and relevance a priority.

Philosophy is an irrational endeavor that necessitates an inquiring mind and an openness to new ideas in order to arrive at a holistic and accurate picture of the world. Doing philosophy requires taking a skeptical stance toward one's own views in order to ascertain whether or not they are correct and the most enlightened. Chaffee (2015) argues that philosophical critique is universally applicable and is used constructively to gain a deeper knowledge of what's going on. As the only constant in today's world, it's more important than ever for students to develop their critical thinking skills so they can make well-informed choices in all facets of their lives.

A critical thinker takes a thoughtful and well-informed approach to life, which may be applied to other fields of study to better understand how experts in other areas approach problems, draw conclusions, and apply concepts learned from real-world examples. And since all other academic disciplines can trace their roots back to philosophy, it follows that critical thinking is applicable to a wide range of fields outside of philosophy as well (Chaffee 2015). Questioning the most fundamental experiences as a human being is part of what it means to do philosophy. The critical thinking skills and mindset, as Chaffee claims, may be traced back to philosophical debate. In South Africa, philosophic ideas are integrated into the core curriculum through courses like social ethics and, more recently, the still-undefined teaching of life skills. When philosophy is only introduced formally at the university level, as is the case in South Africa today, it misses out on the opportunity to reap the benefits of systematic and intensive exploration at a younger age.

The objectives of education in South Africa are in line with the nature and spirit of philosophy, which aims at enabling individuals to criticize not only their own, but other people's thoughts and notions. Philosophizing is the independent process where thoughts are processed in a logical and coherent manner. According to Richard (2015) philosophy is an art rather than a science. It is a discipline concerned with formulating issues approached from multiple viewpoints. It also invites the use of critical dialogue and reasoned discourse regarding conflicting points of view making critical thought main tools of learning. Philosophy's nature of inquiry helps in exploring each person's unique interests and abilities to maximize self-development. This agrees with the constructivism paradigm that affirms that the learner is an information constructor. Constructivists seem to agree that the process of learning is the dynamic contextualization of constructing knowledge rather than just acquiring it. They further argue that knowledge is best developed based on personal experiences and hypothesized from the environment. Learners then have the chance to test these hypotheses in their interaction and negotiation in social settings. Where each develops a unique interpretation of situations and construction of knowledge.

Empirical evidence from Clackmanshire Schools in the UK, ([www.p4c.org](http://www.p4c.org)\_2006) reported improved cognitive abilities in pupils after sixteen months of philosophical enquiry which were sustained two years later even without further inquiry opportunities. Gains in various fields including improved communication, participation and social behavior were evident after six months of inquiry. Lipman (2021) posits that philosophizing from an early age assists children to cultivate the habit of rational thinking which needs to be encouraged so as to provide smooth

transition to higher levels of critical and creative thinking. This will provide a coherent and meaningful curriculum that students can easily relate to their day to day experiences solving the current concern on student-curriculum disconnect. He further posits that philosophy has to acquire a central place in the curriculum from an early age for pupils to maximize its benefits.

Dewey, a renowned scholar, posits that education and learning are collective and interactive processes and thus the school is a social institution through which reform can and should take place. He believed that learning was supposed to be an active process where learners would come to school `to do things` and live in a community which gave them real and guided realities of day to day challenges that would foster their capacity to contribute to society. He further argues that education must teach students how to live and lead to the realization of one`s full latent and develop the ability to use those skills to make the society of better; stressing the need for each learner to take part in their own learning. Lipman (2014) advocated for introduction of philosophy for children into the education system after witnessing his student`s lack of reasoning abilities. He believed that children were able to think abstractly from an early age; hence, the need to develop reasoning skills by teaching philosophy.

### **Statement of the Problem**

According to government-funded studies, schools are failing to provide students with the fundamentals they need to succeed in life, contribute to national progress, and successfully adjust to a society that is constantly evolving. The goal of the spirit and nature of philosophy is to encourage a constructively questioning attitude toward every area of experience so that one can understand and make better decisions in life through constructive criticism, and it seems that this is consistent with the need to develop such skills, attitudes, and values that promote reflective, innovative, and responsible thought and action. Consistent and extensive philosophical inquiry from a young age can be the best way to develop these abilities. Since philosophy is typically not introduced until the university level in South Africa, it is possible that the country is not taking full advantage of the benefits that this field can offer. This research supports the idea that teaching elementary school students about philosophy in South Africa would help them acquire the critical thinking skills necessary for success in the modern world and enhance the usefulness of their education.

### **Theoretical Review**

#### **Constructivist Theory**

This theory whose main proponents include; Vygotsky L, Piaget J, Dewey J, Rorty and Bruner J.; View learning as a contextualized process where knowledge is constructed rather than just accumulated. ([www.lrnng.theories.com](http://www.lrnng.theories.com)). It assumes that all knowledge is constructed from active, reflective and deliberate engagement of learners within a social context. To constructivists learning is a very personal endeavor for an individual as well as a social process where concepts, principles and rule are applied in a practical real-world context.

Vygotsky (2018) who propounded social constructivist theory argues that culture and context are important in forming understanding. Social constructivist theory holds that learning best happens

in an active social setting. According to the model, learning is a social construct mediated by language through social interaction and captures the reasoning of the mind of an individual in social action. According to this theory learning is a process of of learning the cultural practice of the community y practicing it.

Segal, Chipman and Glaser (2015) found that schools place prioritizes development of reading writing and mathematical skills due to their general applicability neglecting learning reasoning and problem-solving skills required in sophisticated aspects of life. In a swiftly changing world it is difficult to predict what the best applicable skills and knowledge students require; it seems, therefore, that they should be equipped with information that will be applicable throughout their lives. This can be developed through adoption of philosophy lessons for young learners to sharpen their thinking skills not only in the classroom, but in other social settings.. Learners should learn to listen to others as well as respond effectively and develops ability to follow various lines of reasoning taking place in communities of inquiry.

Vygotsky (2018) argues that interactions in social settings precedes a Childs' development ending with cognition. In one of his studies, he specifically examined the role of prior knowledge in science learning. His findings provided that children's cognitive process is a unitary function of spontaneous and scientific concepts. According to Vygotsky, the upward growth of spontaneous reasoning prepares the child for systematic development while scientific concepts introduced by instruction develop downwards to organize and utilize the spontaneous concepts. Culture provides the primary resources needed to restructure prior knowledge. Moreover, the restructuring process itself occurs externally in social discourse. Adults play a crucial role in developing children's social, negotiation and sharing skills by bringing them out through cultural practices. Social constructivism views the circumstance in which learning occurs as vital to learning itself. Learning results from social processes where the child uses experience with language and thought in the presence of one or more participant involved in an interactive process.

Social constructivism is supported by (Lave, (2021) and; Wenger, (2018) who came up with the concept of 'Communities of practice' - groups of people sharing a common love for something and strive to get better at it as they continue practicing. This is in line with the pedagogy of philosophy for children where many of its practitioners like Lipman (2021) emphasize the use of a group inquiring together into questions with the teacher as a expediter who intervenes to encourage thinking at a deeper level while allowing discussion to follow the emerging interest of the group. In so doing knowledge is constructed from mutual social interaction and is enriched.

### **Theory of Discovery Learning**

Bruner, (2015) believed that it is best for learners to discern facts and relationships for themselves through inquiry-based instruction. In a typical enquiry group, a thought-provoking incentive like the use of an image, video can be presented to help learners come up with a response so as to vote for the one they wish to explore. This makes learners part of the knowledge construction making it more meaningful to them. Philosophy according to Lipman (2021) has adapted the use of dialogue to practice the concept of inquiry in a bid to sharpen the social and thinking skills drawn from various diverse perspectives making one think in an accountable way in a group of peers.

Philosophy with its tools of logic and argument was seen as the best means to facilitate meaningful education process to enable sustainable learning and thinking creating a coherent educative process where students can relate their daily experiences to what they learn in class.

This study will showcase the possibility of addressing the challenges of education in South Africa through introduction of philosophy for children at the basic level due to the similarity of their aims. It will also make use of varied reports and ideas from various philosophers and scholars on philosophizing and try to relate them to the situation in South Africa. It will then try to find a relationship and infer how these ideas can help improve the education system in South Africa. Information collected from such reports will be used to make a case for introducing philosophy at basic level of formal education.

### **Empirical Review**

Adom Yeboah & Ankrah (2016) conducted a study on constructivism philosophical paradigm. The constructivism philosophical paradigm is an efficient tool that can yield many benefits when implemented in the carrying out of research in diverse field of study as well as in undertaking teaching and learning activities at any educational level. There was the need to adopt the qualitative research's powerful tool thus, document analysis to present a literature review on the subject to enlighten researchers and teachers of the great imports, rich and useful information that they can glean from this vibrant paradigm of philosophy. The paper projects, how researchers can be coached with this philosophical paradigm in their selection of research design, instrumentation, theoretical framework and data analysis procedures. It recommends viable instructional strategies that teachers can employ for instructing learners in the constructivist approach. The paper contends strongly that the constructivism philosophical paradigm provides a firm foundation for researches, especially in humanities, education and other behavioral researches while maximizing students' learning outcomes when employed in teaching and learning activities.

Murris (2016) examined the philosophy with children as part of the solution to the early literacy education crisis in South Africa. This study argued that insufficient attention is paid to the explicit teaching of comprehension in South African literacy policies and practices. Like elsewhere, governments reinforce the existing curriculum gap by trying to solve the achievement gap in early literacy. The study substantiates the claim through a critical analysis of a report commissioned by the South African government and written by the National Education and Evaluation Unit (NEEDU). At an analytical level there is a logical problem with NEEDU's recommendations about early literacy – there is a mismatch between the solutions and the problems it tries to solve. Unlike government responses to South Africa's very poor results in national and international literacy tests, I claim that the findings of these tests point to the urgent need to teach higher-order questioning skills to teachers explicitly from preschool onwards. By referencing national and international research evidence of an approach to teaching and learning called Philosophy with Children (P4C), the study argues that the inclusion of philosophical thinking in early childhood literacy education could help teach the 'full literacy' as recommended by the NEEDU report.

Ciucci Baroncelli & Toselli (2015) conducted a study on Meta-emotion philosophy in early childhood teachers. Meta-emotion philosophy has been theoretically conceptualized as an

emotional connection between parents and children which reflects parents' awareness, acceptance, and regulation of their own emotions and their awareness, acceptance, and regulation of their children's emotions. The main aim of the current study was to develop and test the psychometric properties of a self-report questionnaire assessing meta-emotion philosophy in early childhood teachers. Participants were 306 early childhood teachers, recruited from 58 day care centers in the center and south of Italy. No main or interaction effects pertaining to teachers' individual characteristics emerged in any of the CEESQ dimensions. Lastly, both Emotional Self-efficacy and Self-efficacy as an Emotional Socializer were positively associated with a Coaching style, with Self-efficacy as an Emotional Socializer playing a partial mediation role. Administering CEESQ and discussing its scores with teachers could work as a prompt in order to discuss and mentalize teachers' emotional work as emotional socializers.

Baş (2015) examined the correlation between teachers' philosophy of education beliefs and their teaching-learning conceptions. The purpose of this study was to examine the correlation between teachers' philosophy of education beliefs and their teaching learning conceptions. For this purpose, the "correlations survey model" was adopted in the study. The data collection tools used in the study were; "Education Beliefs Scale" (Yılmaz, Altinkurt, & Çokluk, 2011) and "Teaching-Learning Conceptions Scale" (Chan & Elliott, 2004). According to the Pearson moments correlation analysis conducted, it was found positive significant correlations between teachers' philosophy of education beliefs and their teaching-learning conceptions. In this study, it was concluded that contemporary philosophy of education beliefs were correlated with constructivist teaching-learning conception and traditional philosophy of education beliefs were correlated with traditional teaching-learning conception. Also, it was understood that teachers' philosophy of education beliefs was a significant predictor of their teaching-learning conceptions.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted a desktop methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

## **RESULTS**

The results were grouped into various research gap categories namely as conceptual, contextual, and geographical.

### **Conceptual Gaps**

Studies by Adom Yeboah & Ankrah (2016), Murriss (2016), Ciucci Baroncelli & Toselli (2015) and Baş (2015), had conceptual framework gap. In addition all the mentioned studies did not establish the importance of incorporating philosophy into early childhood education in South Africa. The studies did not outline the importance of incorporating philosophy into early



childhood education in South Africa clearly. Therefore, the current study seeks to address these conceptual gaps.

### **Contextual and Geographical Gap**

Studies by Adom Yeboah & Ankrah (2016), Murriss (2016), Ciucci Baroncelli & Toselli (2015) and Baş (2015), had geographical gap because they were not conducted in South Africa. This implies that the results may be inapplicable in South Africa since education system in South Africa differs with other countries. The current study seeks to address this gap.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Having a constructive outlook and the ability to think critically are two of the most vital qualities for students to develop when they attempt to adjust to a new and unfamiliar educational setting, as demonstrated by the study. Consistently involving students in tasks that demand critical thinking, innovative problem solving, and argument analysis might help students develop these traits. Students were of the opinion that philosophy classes offered a safe space to raise important questions and share ideas, two essential skills for the development of original thought. This is bolstered by the methodical way in which it tackles issues and develops answers. Learners can engage in a more comprehensive approach of questioning and creating knowledge through "communities of inquiry" in philosophy.

This study hopes to help focus attention on children who find it difficult to enjoy their natural philosophical state of childhood characterized by curiosity, questioning, adventure and creativity in a formal educational setting largely controlled by adults. It will also provide useful information which curriculum developers can use to design basic education curricula that intensively taps onto and develops the innate abilities and inclinations of children; to provide the foundation for subsequent learning. The study will inform the debate of education reform in South Africa by focusing attention on developing children's autonomous learning and critical thinking skills to make them more adaptive to contemporary challenges and becoming effective employers and employees in institutions and encourage national development.

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